

# THIRD CLASS TO DUNKIRK

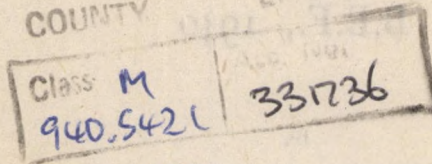
A Worm's-Eye View of the  
B.E.F., 1940

By  
PETER HADLEY

HOLLIS AND CARTER, LTD.  
25, ASHLEY PLACE  
LONDON  
S.W.1

FIRST PUBLISHED 1944

ISLE OF WIGHT  
COUNTY LIBRARY

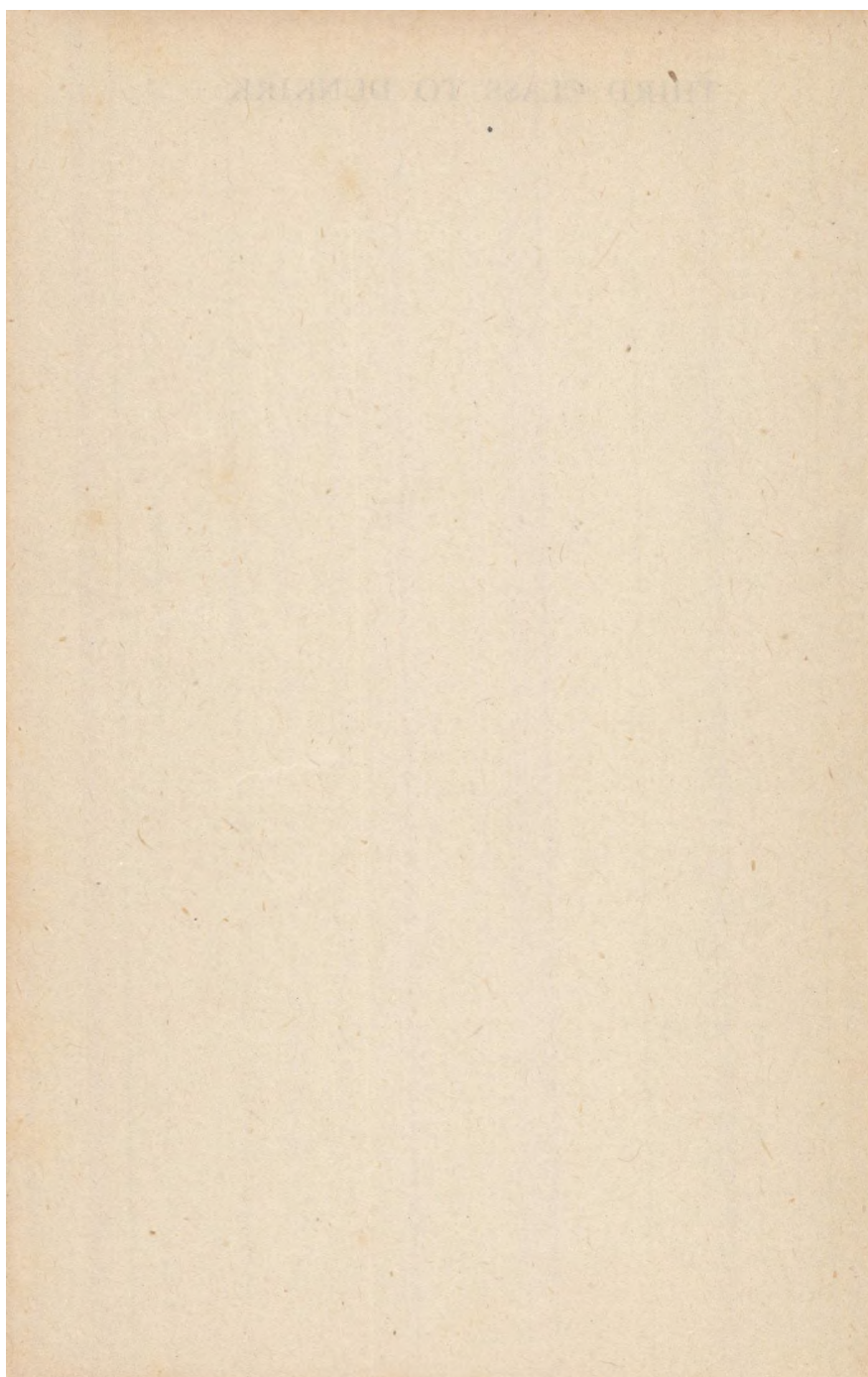


THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED  
IN COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH  
THE AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
FOR  
HOLLIS AND CARTER, LTD.  
1944



THIRD CLASS TO DUNKIRK





## CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
FOREWORD . . . . .	vi
I OUTWARD BOUND . . . . .	I
II ORDEAL BY MARCH . . . . .	10
III "LES VACANCES POUR TOUS" . . . . .	22
IV UP INTO BELGIUM . . . . .	32
V . . . AND BACK AGAIN . . . . .	41
VI BELGIUM ONCE MORE . . . . .	51
VII MAY 21ST . . . . .	62
VIII BEHIND THE ESCAUT . . . . .	76
IX PAWNS IN THE GAME . . . . .	89
X A "POCKET OF RESISTANCE" . . . . .	100
XI MONT DES CATS . . . . .	116
XII THALASSA ! THALASSA ! . . . . .	126
XIII DUNKIRK AND AFTER . . . . .	137
XIV CADENZA . . . . .	145

### PLATES

	FACING PAGE
B.E.F., 1940—WORM'S-EYE VIEW . . . . .	12
B.E.F., 1940—BIRD'S-EYE VIEW . . . . .	32



## FOREWORD

**V**ARIOUS accounts have already been written of that swift and desperate campaign which culminated in the withdrawal of the British Expeditionary Force from France four long years ago. Some of these accounts have been learned historical treatises which have sought to outline events and trace the causes of disaster : others have been highly-coloured personal impressions, rich in excitement and individual heroism. No one—or so it seems to me—has so far set down a plain, unvarnished, day-to-day narrative of those amazing weeks. That is why I have written this book.

I might have embellished these pages with flowery sentiments, portraying myself as a gallant officer, indifferent to hardship, immune from selfishness, ignorant of fear. Instead, I have attempted to record quite simply and truthfully my thoughts and my actions, knowing that I am no better, and hoping that I am no worse, than the majority of my contemporaries, and believing that for this reason a plain statement of an ordinary subaltern's reactions to war may be of interest to the ordinary reader.

PETER HADLEY.

1944

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

To H. C. H.

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan

Don Juan



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

### *Battalion Headquarters*

THE C.O.  
DIGGER (SECOND-IN-COMMAND)  
EGGIE (ADJUTANT)  
DON (INTELLIGENCE OFFICER)  
FREDDIE (M.O.)

### *Headquarter Company*

LYN (SIGNALS OFFICER)  
PAT (CARRIER OFFICER)  
PETER (TRANSPORT OFFICER)

### *" A " Company*

CHRISTOPHER  
JACK

### *" B " Company*

FRANCIS  
CECIL  
ALAN I (No. 10 PLATOON)  
THE AUTHOR (No. 11 PLATOON)  
ALAN II (No. 12 PLATOON)

### *" C " Company*

JOHN

### *" D " Company*

GERRY

And others.



## THIRD CLASS TO DUNKIRK

### CHAPTER I OUTWARD BOUND

1940—*April 8, Monday*

AFTER days, weeks, and even months of rumours, the chosen day for our departure from England turned out to be April 8 ; and on that day we marched forth from the little Dorsetshire village where we had spent the winter, with mingled emotions—sorrow at departure, excited anticipation of the future, and, principally, an all-too-vivid awareness of the weight of our loads. It was in fact the hardest carry we had ever undertaken, and although we had had one or two “dress rehearsals,” they had all been fairly brief, and nothing like the ordeal which we had now to face. We wore greatcoats and full equipment, with one haversack hanging down the left side and another (bulging) down the right ; and our packs, fully loaded with blanket, tin hat, etc., on our backs. Thus laden, we marched the six long miles to the station, and we were not sorry to arrive. My own task was made the more difficult because Thompson, our officers’-mess cook, was delicate and had done little or no marching ; so we had to carry his rifle and equipment between us in order to get him along. That was the first of many lessons that I was to learn—never to do any “wangling” over a man who is useful but physically unfit. It doesn’t pay.

We arrived in the early evening at Southampton, where we embarked on a grey hulk of a ship that had formerly been on the Isle of Man service. The men

dossed down as best they could all round the decks (there was not very much room), and both before sailing and during the crossing there was an atmosphere of undisguised excitement among them, as with children going on a Sunday-school treat. This was hardly surprising, as very few of them had ever been out of England before in their lives. Some imagined, I think, that they were going to a strange land where everything would be totally different, and wrote wonderingly on arrival that the people and the houses "seemed very much the same as those in England"—for all the world as if they had expected to find a shaggy tribe of one-eyed men living in mud huts.

Most of us, I suppose, had at the back of our minds the unpleasant possibility of being torpedoed, but it did not worry anyone very much, as destroyers were known to be about. The strictest discipline, however, had to be enforced about lights and smoking, and each officer did a tour of duty on deck in the course of the night. Cecil facetiously suggested that it would be a good plan to mount an anti-tank rifle on deck in order to deal with any U-boat that might show itself!

In the early morning I had to go round collecting English money for exchange, and then to draw the equivalent in French francs from Christopher, who had set up a makeshift bank in the dining-saloon. The task of doling out odd sums of French money in exchange for what I had received took me a clear week after landing before it was finally completed.

*April 9, Tuesday*

The officers were accommodated in one of the saloons, and we had quite a comfortable crossing, although the vibration and the heat were unpleasant, and I must confess that on waking up in the morning my head began



to spin and I feared the worst. As a result of these misgivings I swallowed two of the old *granules antinausiques* which I had with me—a relic of peace-time crossings, when they had often been my salvation. This was a bad mistake, for they had evidently deteriorated in storage, and I was in a very poor state for the next twelve hours.

Early in the morning we arrived at our port of destination—which had been kept dark, but turned out to be Cherbourg—and then had a tedious march of a mile or two to a “transit camp,” where we spent the day. There was only a limited supply of tents, but luckily it was fine and most people spent the day lying about on the grass and dozing in the hot sun. As usual on such occasions, every soldier rushed for his writing-pad, and before long they were all scribbling away furiously, although no one was actually allowed to post anything except Field Service postcards, which were scarce.

While sitting there in the sun, deeply regretting my *granules antinausiques*, I heard the news that Germany had invaded Denmark and Norway. At first I rejected it as a rumour; but it was confirmed soon enough by the arrival of some French newspapers. War amid ice and snow did not attract us, and there were sighs of relief that we had reached France just in time. I heard later that those who were to have followed us to France were diverted and sent to Norway instead.

During the afternoon I wandered off to have a look at Cherbourg, but was not impressed. A dreary trudge along a seemingly endless stretch of tramlines (on which trams themselves, or indeed any other public vehicle, seemed to be a rarity) brought me at last to the town, which struck me as a drab spot to which I should never wish to return in time of peace. After trying to air my rusty French a little in one or two shops I managed to get



a lift from a French Navy lorry, and made my way back to the camp.

*April 10, Wednesday*

In the evening we entrained once more for an unknown destination, and after travelling all night we peered out of the window to find ourselves at a station called La Hutte Colombiers—not that this enlightened us much, as we hadn't the slightest idea whereabouts in France we were. Actually, as we found out later, we were *west* of Paris, about half-way between Alençon (to the north) and Le Mans (to the south). We were met by Pat, our "Carrier" officer, who had been in France for about a fortnight as part of the advance party. His departure from England had taken place in circumstances of deathly secrecy—although it was difficult to conceal a bulky valise being packed and hauled downstairs.

A march of seven miles or so, with breakfast *en route* shortly after leaving La Hutte, brought us to the battalion area. This was the first time we had really been "on show" on the French roads, and we felt that it was something of an occasion, especially as our packs were now stowed on the platoon truck instead of on our backs. We sang lustily as we passed through every little village—"Tipperary" and other old favourites; newer songs such as "Roll Out the Barrel"; and the "Marseillaise" and the "Madelon," which I had laboriously taught my platoon while we were still in England, although I must admit that with these last two items we did not get beyond whistling or humming. However, that was quite enough for the local inhabitants wherever we went: from the looks on their faces they appeared to regard it as a direct manifestation from Heaven that English soldiers should include French national songs in their repertoire. But amazement quickly gave way to delight, and various

small boys and others would march along beside us and join in the singing. On one occasion we passed an old man who retaliated with a spirited, if slightly inaccurate, rendering of "God Save the King" on a mouth-organ. The somewhat triumphal effect of our march was heightened by a Union Jack which miraculously appeared flying proudly from the muzzle of Pte. Pierce's rifle.

And so we marched on, with the querulous voice of Pte. Reed—a delicate-looking youth who was nevertheless one of the most cheerful and enduring—exclaiming "Stap me!" at frequent intervals from the ranks behind me. These words, inspired by one of the popular "strip" cartoons in the *Daily Mirror*, followed me all over France and Belgium.

We passed through Chérancé, where Battalion Headquarters were to be, and on to a little rambling village a few kilometres beyond, with the pleasant name of Doucelles, which was to be our home. Here at last we were able to sit down and take stock of the situation, although we did not know whether we were to stay for hours, days, or weeks.

*April 10-15, Wednesday-Monday*

We were in comfortable billets, No. 10 Platoon in a big loft belonging to a M. Mallisigny (immediately re-christened "Mulligatawny"), and Nos. 11 and 12 in empty houses. As it turned out, we had a pleasant and placid time in Doucelles for several days, with only routine matters to worry us. The people were extremely kind, especially the family at the farm where I myself was billeted. Here I was asked downstairs for a cup of *café cognac* each evening, when I sat trying to converse with my host—a difficult process, because he had a violent cold in the head which made him unintelligible at times



—while his little daughters stared at me with wide, wondering eyes.

We did no training at Doucelles, as all the fields were either under cultivation or else reserved for *pâture* ; and the only thing of a military nature that was attempted was a demonstration which I arranged with my platoon, intended to show the right and the wrong methods of trench reliefs and sentry duties. We put this on in the form of a play, and I found my platoon rich in dramatic talent. I can hear to this day Pte. Baldwin's protesting wail after his comrade, Pte. Clarke, had been accidentally "shot" by a sentry—"Look what you done to Nobb-ee !"; and I can still see Pte. Reed dressed up as a fifth-columnist village yokel (in an incredibly old black striped suit and hat which I borrowed for him from my host), wandering across a field in front of the "trench," with an old pipe in his mouth, spitting nonchalantly from time to time, and furiously gesticulating on being challenged by the sentry.

Two things struck us all very forcibly at Doucelles, and, indeed, wherever we went in France : first, the incredible amount of work done by the women and the almost total absence of men ; and, second, the vast amount of cultivated and pasture land as compared with Great Britain. In most places it was virtually impossible to find a field for football ; although we did get the use of one at Doucelles (thanks to M. Mulligatawny), and Alan and I took part in a rather unscientific battle between our two platoons. M. Mulligatawny, who appeared as a spectator on the touch-line, was inspired to reminiscences of the occasion when he had visited London for an International match ; and his pronouncements on the game were listened to with marked respect until it turned out that he had not himself participated.

One of the better sights was that of our soldiers attempt-



ing to copy the local clothes-washing technique—which consisted of kneeling down at the edge of a pond and banging away at the dirty linen with a wooden board. The men thought this the greatest fun in the world, and so did the local inhabitants ; but I can't say that the results achieved were outstanding. An old crone, who lived near by attempted to instruct them, but the language difficulty proved an insuperable obstacle.

It was at Doucelles that the men had their first experience of the French wines. Most of them had previously never tasted anything but good old English beer, and the results of their experiments were amusing ; for many thought that wine, like beer, should be consumed by the pint and not by the wineglass. The relative cheapness of champagne helped to foster this notion ; but a single night was in most cases sufficient to dispel it. I remember in particular the unhappy case of our company storeman—ordinarily an extremely reserved and sober little individual. I came into the company office fairly late one night, to find the C.S.M. and L/Cpl. Greenfield (the Company clerk) chuckling to themselves over something ; and my eye soon fell on the wretched storeman, who was sitting in a dim corner “alone and palely loitering,” with a distinctly glassy look in his eye. Even as I watched he twitched visibly and started on an erratic course towards the door, and after staggering in an equally zigzag fashion down the passage he disappeared into the friendly darkness of the garden, where fifteen minutes later he was found lying supine. He was eventually led with difficulty to his couch, and soon passed away into peaceful oblivion.

The comparative absence of military duties gave the troops abundant leisure for letter-writing. The British private soldier is a faithful, if not particularly original, correspondent, and at every spare moment he will

laboriously churn out a letter to his mother, his wife, or his best girl : which means that his unfortunate platoon commander, who has to censor these letters, is confronted by seemingly endless heaps of envelopes, and seldom has time to do any letter-writing himself. The ordinary soldier, not much of a hand with the pen at the best of times, finds the fear of censorship a paralysing influence, and in many cases concludes his letter almost as soon as he has begun it : others manage to keep going sufficiently to turn the page, simply by using long-winded and trite phrases which swell the text but mean little. Such phrases recur with monotonous regularity—e.g. “hoping this finds you in the best of health as it leaves me A 1 at present.” But, for all their shortcomings, these letters are a revelation, and although it is not an agreeable task to have to read other people’s private correspondence, it is undeniable that in skimming through letter after letter one cannot fail to obtain a fairly accurate impression of the character of the writers. I myself was left with nothing but an enhanced admiration for my men as a result of having franked their correspondence. I was particularly struck by their devotion to their families, their cheerful courage, and their pathetic blind optimism as to the speed with which the war would be finished. Altogether I feel that the censorship of letters, however distasteful it may seem, is a real help to the platoon commander in his relations with his men, since it enables him to know them more intimately and to understand their attitude towards the life they are leading. Even if he learns no more than that his men are short of razor-blades, he has achieved something of value.

On Saturday evening the news arrived that we were to leave Doucelles on Monday, and great was our consternation when we read that our destination was “Marseille.” Visions of Egypt and India arose before us,



only to fade when we were referred to a map sheet of "N.W. Europe." So it was to be Norway after all ! But then why in Heaven's name were we sailing from Marseilles ? It was all very puzzling. It came as something of an anticlimax, therefore, when we discovered that the Marseille for which we were bound was Marseille-en-Beauvaisis, a small town north-east of Paris, and that we were merely being sent up to the Belgian frontier.

The real mutual affection which developed between the inhabitants and ourselves made our ultimate parting quite a wrench. One of the principal characters was M. le Maire, a genial old man with a grizzly moustache who kept wandering in and chattering away in a curious *patois* French which was extremely difficult to understand. He was particularly kind to our batmen, and brought constant supplies of cider over to the mess for them ; while he plied us at regular intervals with his excellent *vin d'Anjou*. Just before we left, the old boy took me with a knowing air into his room at the back of the house and gave me a farewell glass, and I think he was quite upset at our departure. Incidentally, he took the opportunity of showing me all the old mayoral records, which dated back to about the year 1793.

There was a very hospitable café—the Café Besnard—at the back of the one and only village shop (where Alan II asked for "*La pain*" and obtained a rabbit !), and one or two of us used to foregather there in the evenings after closing time to drink a cup of *café cognac*. It was all pleasantly informal, *en famille*, and there was a good deal of banter flying round, mainly directed at the seventeen-year-old daughter, Jeannine, who, as the only eligible girl in the village, had the time of her life, and on the last evening collected a mass of souvenirs from all and sundry. There was also a little boy, Gaston, who wept copious tears when his mother finally packed him off

to bed. It was sad having to leave such kind-hearted people: but we promised to come back and see them again one day, and I for one intend to do so at the earliest opportunity.

## CHAPTER II

### ORDEAL BY MARCH

*April 15, Monday*

WE left Doucelles on Monday, April 15, and the inhabitants gathered at the corners to wave good-bye as we marched out—including a sorrowful little group of our friends from the Café Besnard. It rained heavily while we were on the march, and as I had no ground-sheet with me I was soaked by the time we arrived at La Hutte. Here we found that the train was not due to leave till three hours or so later: several of us partook of an excellent omelette and some red wine at a local restaurant, and when we boarded the train again we were in good spirits. Alan II, Pat, and I travelled with Freddie (the M.O.), thanks to whom we managed to maintain the party spirit pretty successfully. Shortly before the train was due to start he disappeared into the dusk in search of *vin blanc*, returning in the nick of time, when the train was already in motion, and being hauled aboard amid cheers, breathless but with two bottles of nectar intact.

*April 16, Tuesday—April 17, Wednesday*

We detrained the next morning at Grandvilliers, and marched to Dargies, where our company was billeted for two nights. It was not an attractive place, and the people were noticeably colder and less friendly than at



Doucelles, but for all that we continued to enjoy life. On the second evening we had our dinner cooked by one of the local cafés, with excellent results. I myself had to be on duty in the company office, but dinner was sent up to me—together with an excellent glass of wine, and a Benedictine to follow—and accompanied by a lively, if somewhat incoherent, exchange of notes. Once again we did nothing in the way of soldiering, except a little drill on the morning after our arrival.

*April 18, Thursday*

It was, however, the calm before the storm ; for on the following day we began an exhausting training march up towards the Belgian frontier. This was the hardest thing we had yet attempted, although at the time no one realized what was in store for us.

We set off that Thursday morning in good spirits, but we soon began to realize that we were up against it. It was a grillingly hot day, and although our packs and blankets were stowed on the trucks, our equipment hung like a leaden weight from our shoulders, and we soon began to count the minutes between our hourly halts. By the time the dinner halt arrived we were most of us dead beat, and more than ready for sustenance. I confess I was eagerly looking forward to my portion of stew, only to find, when the turn of the officers came, that there was none left. There was nothing for it but to try to appease the pangs of hunger with some dry bread, but it was a poor substitute and I did not feel greatly invigorated. I thought then, what I still believe to be true, that the emphasis laid on the comfort of the men sometimes results in the wretched officer being entirely neglected. No one denies that the men must come first ; but surely the officers (who are themselves only human, after all, and just as much in need of food as the private

soldier) should come second, rather than nowhere. However, time has now softened the bitterness of my feelings on that occasion.

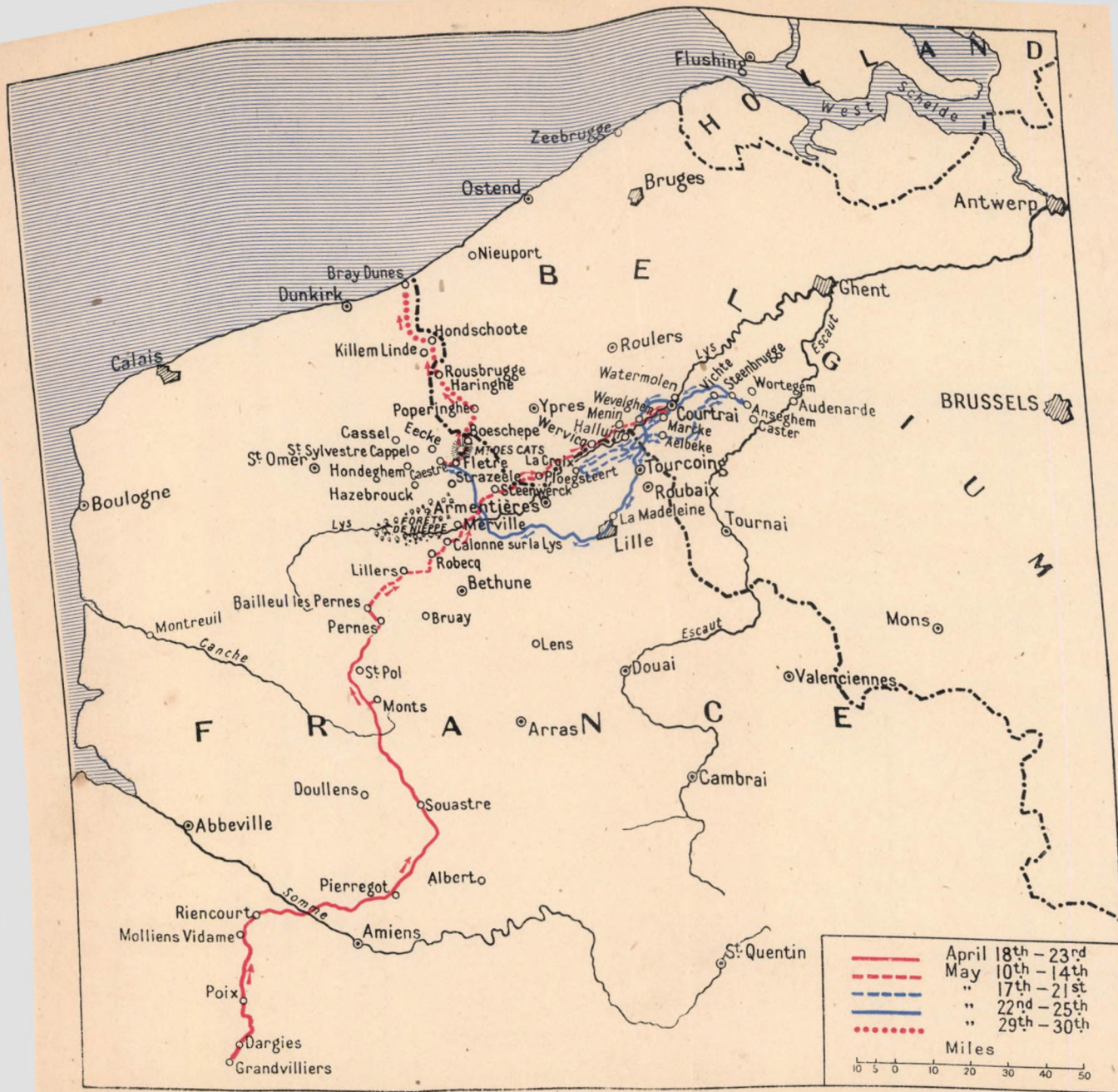
This was the first long march that we had undertaken—about 22 miles—and although no one in our company fell out, it was a very weary body of men that crawled that evening into the village of Riencourt. I do not know whether our weariness coloured our impressions, but the fact is that of all the places we visited none seemed more friendly and charming in its atmosphere than this little village. From the first moment we saw its roof-tops peeping out from the trees below us, with lush green meadows all round, I felt a strange affection for it : and the kindness of its inhabitants and the tranquillity of its streets made it seem a blessed haven of rest after our toil along the dusty roads. At one end of the village ran a mill-stream in which we bathed our hot and aching feet ; the water was icy cold and deliciously refreshing. One man, Pte. Shepherd, bravely set an example by diving right in : Cecil and I bet Alan the next day that he would not do the same thing : he accepted the challenge, and I was the poorer by twenty “ Players ” in consequence.

*April 19, Friday*

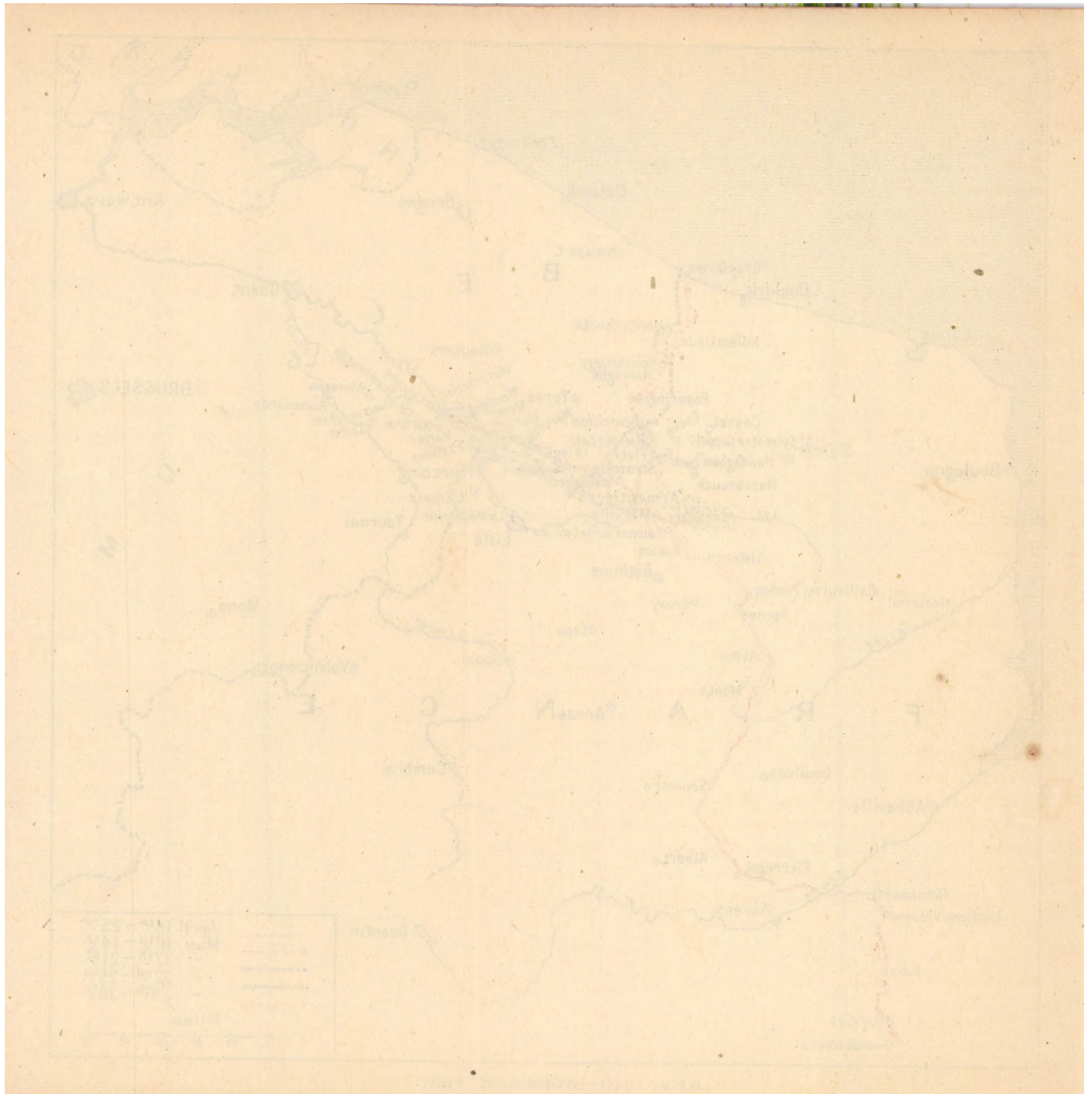
We heard with relief that we were to remain at Riencourt for a day before resuming the march, and this gave us an opportunity for some much-needed rest, as well as for a variety of other things, including, in my own case, a haircut from the company barber.

On Friday afternoon Alan and I paid out the company in the courtyard of the big building which served as Mairie-cum-everything else, including company office, to the great interest of the local child population, who peered with curious eyes through the railings. (It was on that occasion that one of the older soldiers, who had seen





B.E.F. 1940—WORM'S-EYE VIEW





Indian service, took his fifty francs and reported to me, "Fifty rupees correct, sir": such is force of habit!) The Mairie also had an imposing balcony, which provided a pleasant interlude, when one or two of us called up from the courtyard "We want our Führer," and Cecil duly appeared majestically from the double windows, with a tablecloth swathed turban-like about his head and an improvised mantle falling royally from his shoulders.

I was very comfortably billeted in a private house, not the least attraction of which was that its *cabinet*, though situated as always (like *la plume de ma tante*) *dans le jardin*, had at least the elements of decent sanitation. I never cease to wonder how it is that the French, who set so much store by personal comfort, and frequently regard the English as boorishly ignorant of the real refinements of life, nevertheless neglect altogether a problem whose solution we ourselves regard as essential to our daily well-being.

On the evening of our arrival I had one of the most enjoyable baths of my life. When I had at last finished the foot-inspection, blister-pricking, latrine-siting, and all the other hundred-and-one things that are devised to test the endurance of the poor platoon commander at the end of an exhausting day, the excellent Johns (my batman) fetched my portable bath from the platoon truck and put it in a little outhouse which my hostess set at my disposal, and in which she lit a fire and did everything possible to make me comfortable. It was a glorious feeling to sit in that canvas bath and splash lazily in the warm water, and I emerged like a giant refreshed. Truly luxury is a comparative value.

There were two pleasant *estaminets* in Rencourt, and we made the most of them in the evenings. At one of them M. le Patron had an old trumpet on which, with cheeks bulging and temples nearly bursting with effort,

he played a variety of bugle calls dating from his own days with the army : he also possessed a violin whose appearance and performance stamped it as a long way pre-Stradivarius, and this too was used by him to regale us with sweet music, though unfortunately the maestro's range was somewhat limited by the absence of the G string. After I had heard one or two performances in the higher registers I decided that a missing E string would have been preferable. His bow, too, had long since started to moult, and altogether I suppose it was not really surprising that the instrument responded so unenthusiastically to his entreaties.

Another attraction of this café was an automatic machine which enabled two to play against two at football—a game which I had thoroughly enjoyed a year or two before when on holiday in France, and for which I had searched vainly in England. Many exciting matches were played, inter-platoon and inter-everything else imaginable; and I was sorry when the time for departure arrived.

Reader, if peace ever returns to this crazy world, and you yourself would know what peace can mean, go to Riencourt. How you can get there I do not know—I do not even know where it is, except that it is between Dargies and Pierregot, and that does not leave me, or you, any the wiser. But do not expect amusement, for there is nothing whatever to do—nothing, sweet, heavenly nothing : hence, I suppose, the very name of the place. All is calm and placid, and the silence of the dusk is broken only by the croaking of the frogs in the water meadows, the sound of which comes through the evening air like the distant whirring of some gigantic dynamo.



*April 20, Saturday*

They told me at Riencourt that the croaking of the frogs was a sign of "*beau temps*," and sure enough it was. The next day, when we set off once more on the march, was grilling, and at the dinner halt we got the order "Coats off": this made marching cooler, but I found that the tapes of my gas cape cut me under the arms, and would have preferred to keep my jacket on.

Whenever my platoon grew tired of rolling out the barrel or hanging up the washing on the Siegfried Line (a praiseworthy intention which was destined to remain unfulfilled), they broke into a chorus of "Number Ten has got the wind up," sung to the tune of "Glory, Glory, Alleluia," or "Knees Up, Number Ten," these jibes being immediately drowned by Alan's platoon in front, who would yell "Oh my, what a rotten song!" for all they were worth. And we ourselves dealt likewise with the ruderies that came from Alan II's platoon behind us. They, incidentally, acquired a small drum in some nefarious manner, and beat it on the march almost unceasingly—much to our chagrin, for their step was considerably faster than ours and we were thrown badly out of our stride. I fancy that drum came to an untimely end one evening. All very childish, the cynic may say, and truthfully so: but then marching troops have little time for the refinements of humour.

If anything, this day's march was even more exhausting than the one to Riencourt: but everyone stuck it remarkably well, and only one man in the company dropped out—and he not until his feet were giving him unbearable agony. In other companies (and also in our Regular battalion) we heard that quite a few had already fallen out, so we felt duly proud of ourselves, and determined to keep it up. In spite of the general exhaustion my

platoon put up a wonderful show when marching in that evening, swinging along in fine style and singing lustily : it was their best performance of all.

Our company area was a place named Pierregot, where the C.Q.M.S. was waiting for us with dixies of hot sweet tea—the nearest thing to nectar I have ever tasted. As at Riencourt, the company was billeted in empty houses, and I was in a farmhouse near my platoon. Here I was greeted by a little boy of five, astonishingly sharp for his years, who took it upon himself to point out the places which he suggested as most suitable for the digging of latrines, remarking sagely, as he led me round, “No bonne, la guerre”—a phrase which I heard repeated many times in various places during the following weeks, “No bon” being apparently a local colloquialism in that part of France.

The company were not too tired to have something of a “party” that night, and I stood my platoon drinks by way of a reward for their efforts. In one *estaminet* the atmosphere was particularly convivial, and I was struck by the amazing *esprit de compagnie* that this march was fostering amongst us. I think we all felt that we were “in it” together, and that we should see it through ; and there was a healthy rivalry between the different platoons which deterred anyone from falling out who might otherwise have been tempted to do so.

The high-spot of the celebrations, which came when the smoke was at its thickest and the singing at its loudest, was a fantastic mock “strip-tease” act put on by two of our old soldiers, L/Cpl. Thomas and Pte. Jones (“Jonah”), and produced roars of applause. I have seldom seen anything funnier than these two methodically divesting themselves of their garments to the accompaniment of a strange kind of oriental music provided by various instruments among the onlookers. Later I made



my way to another *estaminet* run by a mother and her three daughters, where I found my platoon sergeant, Sergt. Johnson, a tough and twinkling-eyed little Yorkshireman, trying desperately to carry on a surreptitious flirtation with one of the daughters behind Mama's back, and whispering (on my prompting) "Vooz ayt bell" in her ear at regular intervals. It was a grand evening, and I went to bed tired but happy.

Many readers will by now no doubt be beginning to form the opinion that our time abroad was an almost unbroken period of alcoholic celebration and riotous living, interrupted only occasionally by a spell of military duty. Already I can foresee savage indictments by carping critics who will with pious horror condemn the "play-boy" attitude of the British officer, and indeed may even go so far as to attribute the fall of France to this cause. But let me hasten to correct any such impression. I have already stated that this was to be a truthful account of day-to-day life in the B.E.F. For this reason I have given space to our recreation no less than to our work, and the fact that the two appear side by side must not be taken to indicate that we attached as much importance to the one as to the other. Nor need the fair-minded reader jump to the conclusion that each visit to an *estaminet* was an evening of licentious abandon: such few "parties" as we had were entirely harmless, and—I hope—not undeserved.

*April 21, Sunday*

We were off again early next morning (Sunday), and once again it was hot and the dust of the roads added to the discomfort of the march. These days of marching were all alike. An early start, followed by a short halt while the different companies assemble as a battalion from their various billeting areas: then off again, with

the blessed halt at ten minutes to every hour—"Fall out, equipment off, smoke"—"Equipment on," "Fall in," off again—and the even more blessed halt of one hour for dinner at noon : then on again, growing footsore by now, and, towards the end of the day, with each halt increasing the agony of putting one's foot to the ground. Two or three miles to go, and there is Lloyd with the "P.U." (Company 8-cwt. truck), and the platoon sergeants go off ahead in it to see their platoon areas, amid the usual taunts from the company—(Oh, so you can't take it, eh ? !). Then at last the arrival, the allotment of sections to billets, and the invariable grumbles of tired men (funny how exhaustion always brings bad temper and discontent) ; after which comes the inevitable foot-inspection where the long-suffering platoon commander is confronted by seemingly endless pairs of hot, unsavoury feet—soft feet, horny feet, black feet, white feet, brown feet, pink feet, some with gigantic blisters to be pricked, some with deep-seated corns about which one can do nothing, some with red raw patches of skin which tell vividly of the agony they have been causing, and which one can only attempt to ease by covering with lint. Yes, when one has told of one long march one has told of the lot.

That night the whole battalion was gathered in one town—Souastre. I was billeted in a private house some way from the company area, and here I was regaled with music by the two daughters of the house, aged 19 and 17. The elder one, Madeleine, played the piano reasonably well, though with a plodding technique and little passion. Her favourite appeared to be Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, the title of which, *Au Clair de la Lune*, she had herself translated into English—she proudly showed me—with more enthusiasm than accuracy, as "To the Plain of the Moon." Jack was there, too, although not billeted in the house, having arrived ostensibly in search



of oranges for the morrow ; we sent out for a bottle of champagne, of which we induced *maman* and her two *jeunes filles* to partake, and we sat there until quite late. I make no claim to be a fluent speaker of French, but Jack's accent had to be heard to be believed, and it was incredibly funny to hear him waxing more and more conversational, and less and less coherent, as the evening proceeded.

*April 22, Monday*

Breakfast the next morning was quite like the good old days of England, for I came down to the mess to find a little pile of letters waiting by my plate : it only needed some marmalade and the *Daily Telegraph* to complete the illusion. Letters from now on became more and more welcome, and later, when communications broke down, the total lack of incoming mail was one of the worst things we had to endure.

Now we were off again—the last day but one. Once again the march was uneventful, except that in the course of it we passed the Divisional and Corps Commanders, and raised some particularly loud and cheery songs to show them that we were not downhearted. As I have said earlier, I had taught my platoon the “Madelon” while we were still in England, and although they knew no words they made a good show of humming or whistling it, until it became virtually our “signature tune.” Of the English songs, the favourites (apart from the regimental song) were “Roll Out the Barrel,” “Hanging out the Washing on the Siegfried Line,” “Oh Gor-blimey, how Ashamed I Was” (popularized by Sergt. Ogg of No. 10 Platoon), “Star of the Evening, Shining on the Cookhouse Door,” and the old favourites “Tipperary,” “Pack Up Your Troubles,” “A Long, Long Trail,” and “Keep the Home Fires Burning.” In

all there were about eight songs which recurred with monotonous regularity, and after a time I wished dearly that we could add to our repertoire.

The company was billeted that night in a village called Monts-en-Ternois. This was to have been "D" Company's area, but was allotted to us at the last minute as it was decided that we were in a better condition than "D" Company to make the extra distance—a compliment which we viewed with mixed feelings. Arrived here, many of the company bathed in a stagnant artificial pool of dubious origin, in the centre of the village; but I did not fancy the look of it myself, and remained content with dipping my feet in it, after which I bicycled bare-footed to the nearest estaminet and drank a bottle of quite good beer ("Oxford Ale," the label called it). I then went in search of my billet, and found that Cecil and I were in a miserable hole more or less in the middle of the local graveyard. Luckily the mother of M. le Maire, a buxom woman who drove round the village in a pony-cart, not unlike Boadicea, offered us beds in her house, and we gratefully accepted. The only drawback was an assortment of fierce dogs at the entrance to the farm. On the left as one entered was a ferocious beast which barked and strained madly at its chains as one passed; and in giving it a wide berth one came close up against the bars of a cage in which there were two or three other monsters even more ferocious. Cycling between Scylla and Charybdis was a hazardous task. I have since wondered whether the Germans passed through this village, and, if so, whether our hostess had the presence of mind to turn the dogs loose before their arrival. I sincerely hope that she did.

While we were at Monts we were encouraged to hear that the C.O. was particularly pleased with "B" Company's performance on the march—and, as he had



already shouted out to me previously "Still the best-marching platoon in the company," my own platoon began to fancy themselves (with some justification, as I naturally thought) as the best in the Battalion. They certainly did stick it remarkably well, and right through the five days of marching not a single man fell out, which was more than most platoons could claim.

It was also at Monts that I heard from Francis that the C.O. had told him that, if an officer was sent to the Saar, I should be the one to go. I appreciated the compliment, though remaining ignorant of what it involved. I was not long left in doubt.

*April 23, Tuesday*

And so to the last day of this wearying march, which somehow did not seem so very terrible, perhaps because by this time the putting of one foot after another had become a purely mechanical process. Also, I adopted the technique of expecting each day's march to be much longer than it in fact was: so that when we approached our destination each evening I was always pleasantly surprised, having screwed myself up to the prospect of another five miles or so.

The company marched in that evening tired but in excellent spirits, extremely pleased with themselves and singing lustily by way of "showing off." It turned out that we were at a place called Bailleul-les-Pernes, along with Battalion H.Q. and "D" Company; "A" and "C" Companies were in the neighbouring village of Aumerval. We had marched in all something like 90 miles in five days, with a one-day interval between the first and second day; and whoever wrote "To travel hopefully is better than to arrive"—R. L. Stevenson, was it?—had obviously never attempted such an exploit. "B" Company had no "fall-outs" even on this last

day ; and, in an order which he published to congratulate the Battalion on its performance, the C.O. had a special word of congratulation for "B" Company for "its sustained and successful efforts." So at any rate we achieved this fleeting moment of glory.

### CHAPTER III

#### "LES VACANCES POUR TOUS"

*April 24, Wednesday*

**B**UT we were not given much time to rest upon our laurels. Within about twelve hours of our arrival I was summoned to the Orderly Room, and there told that I was to run a Weapon-Training cadre course for N.C.O.s beginning the following day, and to prepare a syllabus forthwith. I was also told that the object of my probable visit to the Saar (already mentioned) was to learn about patrols, as I had been chosen to lead the special Battalion Patrol. This patrol was to consist of myself and twenty volunteers to be picked by me out of the whole battalion, and its job would be to carry out special patrol work—"two miles behind the German lines and all that," as the C.O. gaily put it. For this purpose we were to have special training and in general to be "toughened up" by "raw meat" (!), and other means until we were really savage. I am truthful enough to admit that, honoured as I felt at having been selected for such a job, my heart sank a little at the thought of what it would involve. I have not the makings of a hero, and my chances of surviving the war had suddenly, it seemed to me, been considerably reduced. But I did my best to conceal my inner misgivings, and after a day or two, when the news became



known to my fellow officers, I found that I was more or less resigned to my fate. Indeed, my friends began jocularly to speak of me always in the past tense, and I and my little band (not yet chosen) were referred to as the Death-or-Glory Boys. However, I heard no more of the official plans for some days.

*April 24-May 1*

The following week was in marked contrast to the days that had gone before. I was kept very busy instructing and generally organizing the N.C.O.s' Weapon-Training cadre, and, although I had Sergt. Carr to help me, the bulk of the work fell on my shoulders. I did my best to relieve the monotony of Bren and rifle by a certain amount of outdoor work—judging distance, scoutwork, and fieldcraft generally—and altogether it wasn't a bad little syllabus. I found time to spend an occasional evening with my platoon; but even this contact with them was lost before long, as they left Bailleul a few days later to guard an aerodrome at Bruay.

I was billeted at the same farm that we used for our company mess, where a stout old lady and her married daughter (whose *gendarme* husband was in the Pyrenees, of all places) were extremely kind to us. The space available was limited, but they actually withdrew from their own kitchen and left themselves with only one room for all purposes—cooking, eating, and sleeping. Francis and his batman, Dodman, had another room, and I and Johns occupied a little room which we had to enter via the window. The only objection to the place was the presence of an extremely spoiled little boy of four, Guy Delforge by name, who would burst into tears at every possible opportunity. When not weeping, he had a habit of coming coyly up to us at meal-times and singing “*Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot*” or “*Frère Jacques*,”

interspersed with another song he had learned at school, "*Oh, le printemps est joli.*" This was amusing at first, but, after hearing the words "*Frère Jacques*" about fifty times a day, we became a little weary of it.

One evening during this week some of us slipped off into Béthune : I have a shrewd suspicion that it was out of bounds, but we were desperately in need of a little gaiety. Alan and I had originally planned an expedition *à deux* ; but after a fruitless attempt to find transport we had the great good fortune to meet a taxi containing Freddie, Pat, Lyn, and Don, all on pleasure bent. So we packed ourselves in with some difficulty and drove off in high spirits.

It turned out to be an excellent evening. Pat occupied the seat next to the driver and acted as official spokesman, while the rest of us sat in the back and carolled blithely in the knowledge that we were putting our cares behind us. On reaching Béthune we sat down to a very good little dinner, at which Pat scanned the wine list with the air of a connoisseur and succeeded in ordering two different kinds of burgundy. This was the one and only occasion in my life when I have found snails on the menu. Always ready to try anything once, I courageously ordered some, and found to my surprise that they were rather good, with a combined taste of oysters, mushrooms, and liver, though I had some difficulty in coping with the extraordinary gadget which was supplied for the purpose of scooping them out of their shells.

After dinner, which was a prolonged and light-hearted affair, came the difficult task of persuading our driver to take us back to Bailleul-les-Pernes. Pernes itself was his limit, and beyond that he flatly refused to go. Pat expostulated in his best French whenever he could get a word in edgeways, which wasn't very often. "*Mais, vous m'avez dit . . . Parlez plus lentement et à la point*"



(surely a classic phrase). The driver evidently thought us thoroughly unreasonable, and threatened to take us to the Palais de Justice. “*Eh bien, au Palais de Justice,*” rejoined Pat, and off to the Palais de Justice we went. Here we had the good fortune to find a Military Policeman who put the fear of the law into our driver to such good effect that he relented and drove us back to Bailleulles-Pernes after all, where we arrived some time after midnight. A good party.

*May 1, Wednesday*

So a week slipped by, and life began to take on a more settled aspect. And then, on Wednesday, May 1, came the astonishing news that we were going to Le Touquet on the following day! No, it was not intended to be a seaside holiday, although it developed into something like one for most of the Battalion: the object of our visit was to carry out field-firing. My heart sank, for I had all-too-vivid memories of the range in Dorsetshire where, as weapon-training officer, I had endured so many days of drenching rain, and I knew too well what field-firing involved for the wretched W.T.O. Still, there it was and there was no getting out of it. My cadre course, naturally, had to go by the board without my having a chance to round it off.

*May 2, Thursday*

We set out the next day in R.A.S.C. 3-tonners, and arrived about lunch-time. Our destination was not actually Le Touquet itself, but a place called Camiers a mile or two away, and within reasonable reach of Boulogne. Our quarters were in a deserted hotel at some *plage* or other (St. Gabriel, was it?) almost on the water's edge, and the front of this decayed and gaunt structure still ironically bore the faded words “LES VACANCES POUR

rous." I soon felt inclined to add, rather bitterly, "*sauf le W.T.O.*"! Still, we didn't have a bad time on the whole. The first evening (Thursday) several of us lingered late after dinner in the little room we used as our Mess, and we enjoyed ourselves with a spirited sing-song, at which "Cock Robin" was rendered with special vigour and dubious harmony. On the Friday night most of us actually went to a dance at the local military hospital, which made a very pleasant break in our military duties. Here we danced into the night with members of the nursing staff, and I found one sweet little thing with a broad Scots accent, with whom I flirted harmlessly till the strains of "God Save the King" saved me from further efforts.

*May 3-May 4*

I had spent the whole day, as indeed I spent all the following day, supervising the Battalion's field-firing. The range was a splendid piece of country for the purpose—a wide stretch of rolling sand-dunes interspersed with hillocks and patches of trees and scrub, with the sea away behind. The sand was the only disadvantage, since it got into the Brens and rifles in no time and caused a lot of stoppages. It was, moreover, very tiring country to walk over, and as I myself had to go through the scheme with every single rifle platoon in the Battalion (twelve in all), I was pretty weary at the end of it all. The fire effect on the whole was good, much better in fact than it had been in Dorset; but the same old fault still remained—namely, the almost complete lack of section commanders with the capacity to lead and control their men. This disturbed me at the time; and later we felt the effect of this terrible weakness. When we were "up against it," there were very few section commanders who did their job properly.



On the east side of the field-firing range was a small patch of trees which for sheer beauty of colour and texture was one of the loveliest things I have ever seen. Every shade of green and brown were blended in a harmony that was indescribably beautiful—as delicate as Cotman at his best. All round the area, too, contemptuous of the rattle of machine guns and the crack of bullets, the nightingales sang continuously in one irrepressible chorus. They sang day and night from trees, bushes, even from the very house-tops near our hotel: the sound was as persistent as the chattering of crickets in the summer meadows. You who have never heard the song of the nightingale—no need to creep softly into a Sussex wood at dead of night: out there near Le Touquet they sing shamelessly at all hours.

I had been looking forward to a little light relaxation on the Saturday evening, after my labours; but just as I was about to go off into Boulogne an order came through that two officers per company must remain—why, I never discovered. I was one of the unlucky ones, and felt distinctly aggrieved. It was one of those seemingly pointless routine orders that occur from time to time in the Army: it wouldn't have been so bad if any reason had been given, but nothing in fact happened all the evening, and, indeed, there was nothing that could happen. I persuaded a D.R. to bring me back a bottle of champagne to drown my sorrows, but it was of no avail, and after a gloomy dinner I retired to bed, sulking like Achilles.

*May 5, Sunday*

The return journey to Bailleul-les-Pernes the next day, during which I was in charge of our company's "A" Echelon transport, was relieved by a break of about three hours when the Battalion halted for a prolonged

picnic lunch-cum-sleep in a wood some five miles away. It was a glorious day, and as we lay slumberously under the trees, with no sound except the inevitable nightingales and an occasional cuckoo, the war seemed very far off. The only disturbance of any kind was provided by a small French boy who appeared from nowhere and solemnly proffered bunches of lilac to all and sundry.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, except for a little trouble over keeping the right interval between vehicles. The order was "600 yards between companies"—an interval which it is impossible to maintain regularly on a winding road, since, once the vehicles of the company ahead have disappeared from sight, there is no means of knowing whether one is making up distance or losing it. So I found it a little exasperating to be barked at periodically for being too close or not close enough.

Everyone at Bailleul was very glad to see us back, and it felt quite like a homecoming: but for many of the Battalion it was only hail and farewell.

*May 6-May 7*

"B" Company went off the following day on guard duties, 10 and 11 Platoons to guard Béthune aerodrome at Bruay, and 12 Platoon to look after a petrol dump. "A" and "C" Companies likewise vanished into the blue on some sort of labour duties—exactly what, I never discovered. I myself remained at Bailleul with my "Death-or-Glory Boys" (now selected), and was responsible for drawing up and carrying out a special programme of training to toughen them (and me) up. The C.O. wanted me to "lay it on hard" right from the beginning, but I thought it was wiser to achieve the process of toughening by stages. I therefore set to work with the object of gradually piling on the agony until we were



all sufficiently hardened to “take” anything : in fact, I suggested to my stalwarts that their motto should be “I can take it.” We started off gently enough with P.T., fieldcraft, compass work, etc., and then on the first afternoon I gave them a foretaste of what was to come by taking them on a short route march—only about six miles, but a large part of this was done at 140 and even 160 paces a minute. In the evening I took my patrollers out to do a little elementary training in movement by night, and learnt that most of them were quite incapable of moving in the dark without a noise similar to that of a herd of elephants going down to drink.

As Sergeant of my patrollers I had chosen Sergt. Oke, a grand little sergeant from my own company, tough as they make them, and desperately keen, possessing also the enormous asset of cheerfulness. I little knew at the time how soon my opinion of him was to be justified. In addition to Sergt. Oke I had two corporals, Cpl. Wise of “C” Company and Cpl. Glue of “D” Company, and also L/Cpl. Marchant, from my own company, who as a private had impressed me in the early days of the war, in September, and who had just been given a stripe at my instigation during our later days in Dorset. Unlike some others he fully justified it, and even in the strain of battle he never let me down. I had been in some doubt about him owing to his age (33), but he proved himself surprisingly fit and endured physical strain far better than men ten years younger. The remainder of my party were a varied assortment, mostly pretty tough and not at all peace-time soldiers, but just what I wanted for my purpose. I even chose Pte. “Spud” from my own company—one of the most “Bolshie” soldiers who ever existed—and also Pte. Baker of “D” Company, who had a similar reputation.

*May 8, Wednesday*

Wednesday was fairly quiet, and noteworthy only for a football match in which the Death-or-Glory Boys (or "Dogs," as they abbreviated themselves) were handsomely defeated by the "Suicide Squad," i.e. the stretcher-bearers. After tea I obtained the use of a classroom at the local school and gave a very elementary lesson in French to a number of enthusiastic volunteers. I had tried, at Doucelles, to do the same thing with my platoon, for hardly any of them spoke a word of French, and I hoped to teach them at any rate the rudiments. But we never remained in the same place for long enough to get in more than a very occasional lesson, and I fear that my efforts were unavailing. No doubt I was over-ambitious.

That evening we were to have been entertained by an E.N.S.A. concert party in the village's largest barn, but the performers failed to turn up and at the last minute it fell to the officers to substitute for them. The R.S.M. set the ball rolling with some spirited songs and patter; Pat and Lyn told some questionable stories; and I myself, after considerable coaxing from Digger and a champagne bottle, spoke to the assembled multitude first as Neville Chamberlain and then as Adolf Hitler. Next, four of us rendered "Cock Robin," followed by an exceedingly bad impromptu sketch; and Digger concluded the proceedings by mounting the stage himself and telling a story, which was, however, somewhat spoilt by the fact that it ended with the question "And what do you think he said?" and some tactless private in the front row, who had heard the story before, unhesitatingly supplied the correct answer. After that we all retired to the Battalion mess for something to eat. Here we learned that it was Freddie's birthday, and in view of this it was not very long



before some of us slipped surreptitiously away from that somewhat formal atmosphere. We proceeded up the road towards the *estaminet* where someone (who, I never discovered) was conveniently billeted, bearing Freddie—protesting in his usual mild and polite manner—aloft on our shoulders. There followed what was undoubtedly one of the better evenings of the war, during which we sang the old favourites, “Cardinal Puff” and “Dan, Dan . . .,” and the normally sedate Freddie was to be seen sitting with a glass of champagne perched precariously on his head and a bland and blissful look on his countenance.

*May 9, Thursday*

On the Thursday my company returned from its guard duties, somewhat regretfully, for I gathered that the work had not been exactly arduous. I continued to train my Death-or-Glory Boys, however, Cecil being now in command of my platoon—which was something of a wrench, as I had been with them ever since September. That afternoon I decided that it was time to accelerate the toughening-up of my patrollers, and so off we went in full battle-dress, with steel helmets and respirators at the alert, on a three-mile road run. This certainly shook them a good deal, and there was considerable straggling by the heavier smokers; it was not a pleasant ordeal, especially as it was a very hot afternoon, and I must admit that I was sorely tempted to turn for home after we had been going a few minutes. But it was a most valuable piece of training, not least because I found out in the course of it which of my men had “guts” and which had not. All the same, I should not have attempted anything so arduous if I had known what the next twenty-four hours had in store.

CHAPTER IV  
UP INTO BELGIUM . . .

*May 10, Friday*

THE next morning the real war began. I was woken up at about four o'clock by the sound of anti-aircraft firing, and on struggling out of bed I saw the sky dotted with shell-bursts. Everyone dressed hastily and went to alarm posts, and on going outside we saw half a dozen German planes flying at about 10,000 feet and seemingly untroubled by the A.A. fire—admittedly most erratic—which greeted them. These planes went on circling round spasmodically for an hour or more, although they did not drop any bombs; and this was the first of the many occasions when we asked ourselves—first with curiosity, then with impatience, and finally with despair, "Where are our fighters?"

After breakfast there was to be a route march, for which my patrollers were to be attached to "D" Company. Then came word that the march was cancelled, followed almost at once by a vague but insistent rumour: Germany had invaded Belgium and Holland. Unlike most Army rumours (such as the fantastic tale that America had declared war, which recurred later with monotonous regularity), this particular one turned out to be well founded. The general reaction was, I think, a feeling of relief that at last something had happened, coupled with a slight sinking in the region of the stomach at the thought of what the immediate future might hold in store for us. Bailleul-les-Pernes hummed with an air of intense excitement and everyone began making rapid preparations for the move which now seemed certain. I myself, on the assumption, later justified, that the

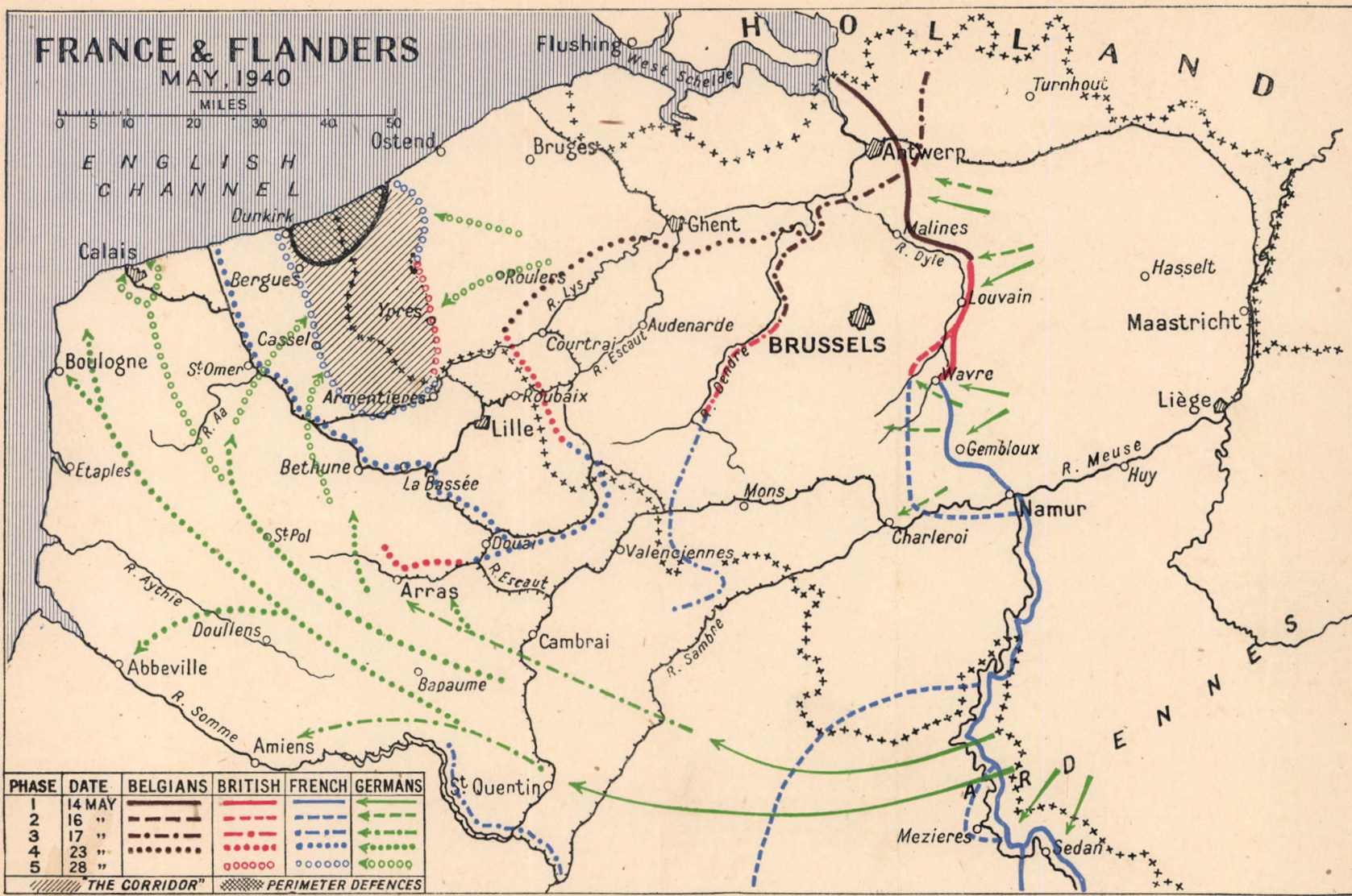


# FRANCE & FLANDERS

MAY, 1940

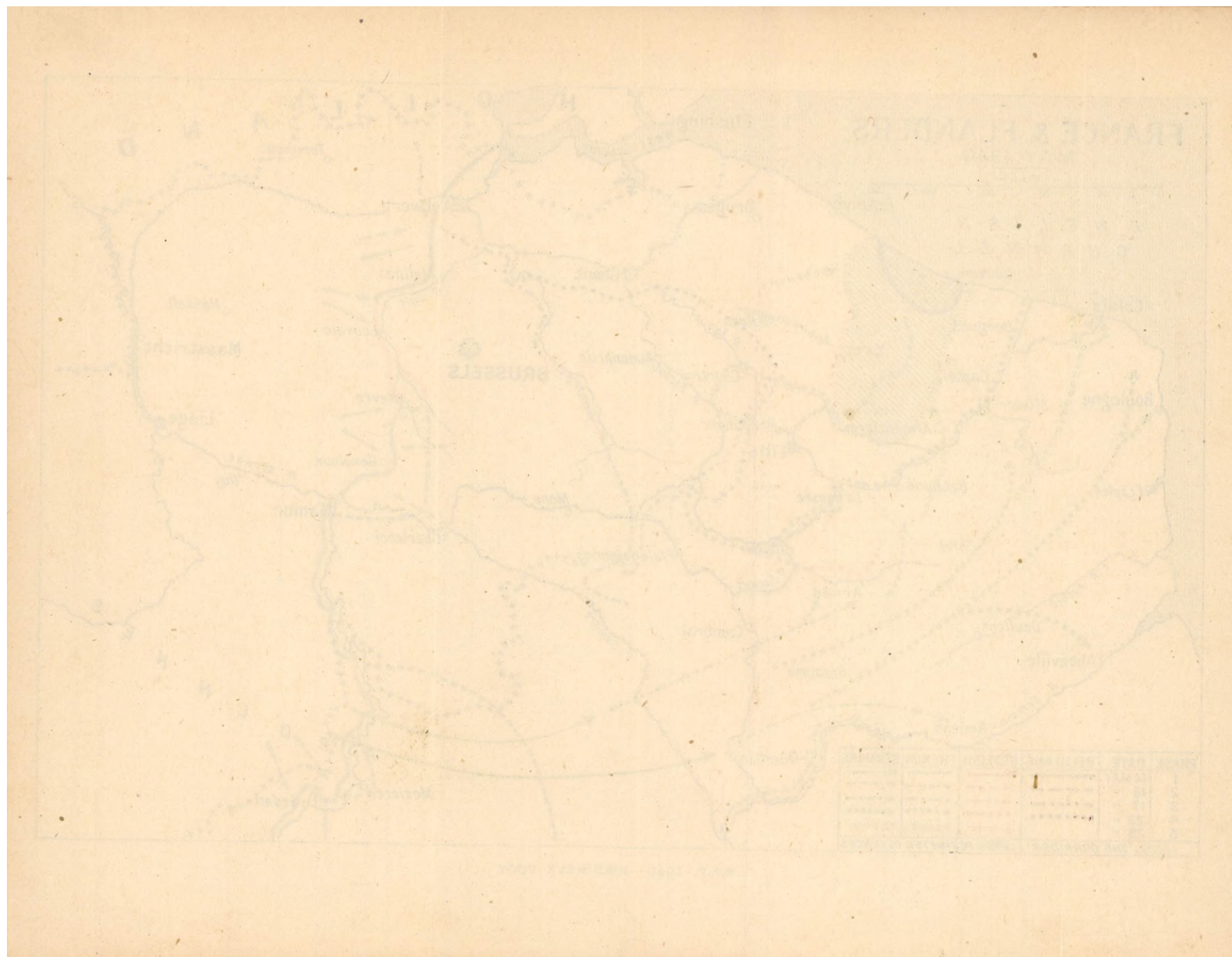
MILES  
0 5 10 20 30 40 50

ENGLISH  
CHANNEL



B.E.F. 1940—BIRD'S-EYE VIEW







"Death-or-Glory" patrol would no longer be operating as such, disbanded my retinue of ruffians and sent them off to their respective companies. And so once more I found myself with No. 11 Platoon, and not altogether sorry to rejoin them.

We hung around all day waiting for developments, and at last, about 5 p.m., we moved off. Alan (who had been left behind at Camiers ostensibly "to help the other battalions in the Brigade," but in actual fact to have the time of his life doing nothing) appeared miraculously at the last minute almost at the very moment of departure.

Just before we left I learned from Cecil that our approximate destination was a place called Robecq; it didn't seem to be too far, which in terms of marching means that at any rate it was still on the same map sheet. We passed, on our way, through Marles-les-Mines, where the company had been sent for baths whilst at the Bailleul-les-Pernes, and the hourly ten-minute halt found us in the centre of the town. The inhabitants pressed bottles of beer upon us, and other forms of refreshment; but all had to be regretfully but firmly refused, as it was a battalion rule that nothing but water was to be drunk on the march. It needed some strength of mind to observe it, but it was a good rule for all its apparent harshness, and I was furious when I caught one of my men defying my solemn warnings and surreptitiously swigging at a bottle of beer produced by some local worthy for his benefit.

In the course of the day we saw the remains of a crashed German plane being brought back on a lorry, with the swastika markings plainly visible, and great were the cheers as it passed. And in the evening we had a few more moments of mild excitement, when a number of German planes came over, and, as we marched along,

the sunset sky was tinged with smoke puffs and streams of tracer.

Robecq came at last, but still we trudged on, into the dusk and finally into the darkness, till we arrived, some time after ten o'clock, at a place which we found the next morning to be called Calonne-sur-la-Lys. Here, as usual, we were billeted in farms, though I am glad to say that this was the last time we had to persevere with the farce of keeping billeting records. One of the few blessings of battle is that as the fighting becomes more intense the number of Army forms grows correspondingly smaller. When I first received a 2-inch mortar for my platoon I was solemnly issued with a large foolscap cardboard folder, on which I was meant to fill in, among other things, the occasions on which the weapon was used, whether its performance was satisfactory, etc. As it happened I never had to fire it in anger, but I have some doubts as to whether in the fog of war I should have taken out my fountain-pen while sitting in a muddy trench, and recorded the firing of each bomb. Not that we could have used the thing, anyway, since the firing-pin spring was lost some months before we went abroad and was never replaced in spite of frequent appeals to the authorities : just as one of my three Brens was minus its bipod from December onwards, and was thus incapable of automatic fire—a state of affairs which was never remedied.

In spite of the lateness of our arrival at Calonne, the usual foot-inspection, latrine-digging, etc., had to be done ; and we knocked up the farmer's wife and found a room to sleep. Johns like a true friend got my Primus stove off the truck, scrounged some tea, milk, and sugar, and brewed me the most delicious pot of tea I ever tasted. We finally got down to sleep sometime after midnight.



*May 11, Saturday*

The next morning we received a large bundle of mail, which cheered us greatly, and I myself was deluged with four or five parcels containing good things of every kind which I had to carry round for some days on my already overloaded platoon truck, until there was an opportunity to do them justice.

This must have been one of the last places from which mail went out. Certainly many letters were written—and laboriously censored—during the days that followed ; but even though they may have reached Battalion H.Q., I very much doubt if any of them got much farther than that. I even managed to scribble a few letters here myself—including a special message to my mother from the old woman at the farm !

After a morning spent in foot-welfare and letter-writing, we moved off again, and arrived in the evening, after a fairly short march, at Steenwerck, just short of the Belgian frontier. Here Alan and I found ourselves billeted with some very pleasant people over a shop in the centre of the town, and with a keen sense of anticipation we ordered a hot meal (including the inevitable chips) for about 10.30 p.m. However, at the last minute we received an imperious summons to a conference with Francis in a local *estaminet*, where we were informed with becoming gravity that German parachutists were reported to have landed the previous day in Ploegsteert (“Plug-street”) Wood, which lay on our route for to-morrow ; and the task of patrolling the wood and thus ensuring the safe passage of the Brigade was to fall to “B” Company. This was quite exciting, for it was our first possibility of contact with the enemy, and I think we all of us felt a little apprehensive ; but so far as Alan and I were concerned this was largely tempered by clamant hunger

and an increasingly vivid mirage of omelette and chipped potatoes. At long last we dispersed, and as we left the *estaminet* a man in the uniform of a French officer drove up in a car and asked us to tell him where Brigade H.Q. was situated. I was immediately suspicious, and asked him into the *estaminet* with a view to "checking up" on him; but just as we were going in Francis emerged and with an innocence worthy of Gainsborough sent him off with all the information he required. He may, of course, have been perfectly genuine, but I have always regretted that we never took him into the light and had a look at him. There were so many cases of "dirty work" that one had to be suspicious of everything and everybody.

And so Alan and I got back—an hour late, it is true—to our meal, and very welcome it was. Our hosts, a married couple, were extremely kind, and not the least of their kindnesses was to switch their wireless to London so that we could hear the midnight news in English. It was a curious sensation to hear the B.B.C. announcer in such circumstances, although I do not remember what the substance of the news was; I recall only that the news seemed reasonably cheerful, and certainly, as I now realize, painted altogether too rosy a picture of the situation.

*May 12, Sunday*

We marched off early the following morning, ahead of the rest of the Battalion, for we had to be in position by about 10.30 a.m., and the wood had first to be reconnoitred in order to find the best way of patrolling it.

In the course of the march we crossed the frontier into Belgium—a most confusing affair; for some time after crossing it we had one country on our right and another on our left, although we were marching eastwards. I had never expected to revisit Belgium in such



circumstances ; nor did I think, when I was at " Plug-street " in 1930 during a tour of the battlefields, that ten years later I should be sitting in that very place looking out for German parachutists !

We received quite a cheery welcome from the Belgian inhabitants, though I had the impression that so many British troops had already passed through that we were no longer much of a novelty. My men were surprised to find that Belgium was apparently no different from France, just as they had been surprised to find that France was similar to England. They were particularly amazed to find that the Belgians spoke French, and not Belgian.

Francis went on ahead in his P.U., which, in accordance with the usual routine, was later sent back to bring up the platoon commanders. As we reached the wood we half expected a clash with parachutists at any moment : we got the clash all right, but not the parachutists, for a D.R. ran right into the back of our truck with an almighty wallop, and, when I peered forth through the curtain at the back, there he was lying on the road with his head pretty badly cut about. However, we patched him up as best we could with a field dressing, and sent him back ; he wasn't seriously hurt, and, taking a long view, I suppose he was lucky to get out of it before the fun started. This was the first of almost innumerable motor-cyclist casualties I have seen during this war : it is a dangerous form of amusement.

Our platoon localities having been duly allotted, I established my headquarters in the shade of a Dutch barn, where we settled down to a peaceful and entirely uneventful day. The wood was a thick one and the system we adopted was to put standing patrols about fifty yards in from the edge in those places where it came right down to the road, dispersing men at intervals ;

and, where the wood was some distance from the road, we covered the edge (and the intervening ground) with Brens. The wood itself was dark and rather eerie, and it was not hard to imagine a hundred enemy parachutists lurking in its depths ; in fact, Sergt. Johnson and I several times imagined that we saw sinister shapes moving in the shadows the other side of our clearing—an impression which was heightened by the slight heat haze which rose from the meadow in between. Even the men (who, as Sergt. Johnson once remarked to me in broad Yorkshire, “ ’aven’t the imagination of a gnat ”) were on the *qui vive* ; and in particular I shall never forget the horrified look on the face of one man, and the convulsive shudder which accompanied it, when I went along the track inside the wood, up to where he was lying some sixty yards or so ahead of the rest of his section, and tapped him on the shoulder to ask if all was well. He positively groaned with terror, and I couldn’t help laughing.

The Battalion passed by in due course, unambushed, and we packed up and followed some way behind them, with a feeling of anticlimax. The only thing resembling a parachutist that we had seen was a small piece of burnt parachute silk which a passer-by claimed to have found in the wood, and which he gave to one of our drivers.

We arrived that evening at a place with the delightful name of Coucou (Flemish “ Koekoek ”) ; I was particularly glad to get there, as I had begun to have trouble with the little toe of my right foot, which was extremely painful and made marching an agonizing business. It had started with a blister, which the M.O. had cut somewhat too ruthlessly at Calonne ; and the result was that I limped along at the head of the platoon, hardly able to bear the weight of my foot upon the ground, and with



the whole platoon limping in unison behind me ! It was an unpleasant experience, and not improved by the cobbles with which most of the roads were paved. I was heartily thankful when I heard that we were not to leave Coucou on the following day, but were to have a day's rest there. I slept that night in a grain loft above a barn, with my platoon, and awoke refreshed in spite of an "*alerte*" which sounded in the small hours.

*May 13, Monday*

The farm where my platoon was billeted was owned by a buxom woman, Flemish in origin and in appearance, who very generously cooked vast quantities of chipped potatoes for hungry officers. The good lady's French was pretty shaky, as she could remember only a little of what she had learnt at school, but we managed to carry on a conversation reasonably well. She had three very attractive little children, all platinum blondes with straight hair, who gazed solemnly at us with big round blue eyes which proclaimed that they had never seen anything quite like us before in their lives. The husband, we gathered, was serving with the Belgian army : she showed us a photograph of him, and also a whole picture-frame full of family portraits of every kind, all head-and-shoulders—rather the Flemish equivalent of the British family photograph album. We did our best to seem politely interested, but I must say that I did not find a photograph of, say, her brother-in-law's grandmother particularly inspiring.

I had hoped to spend a restful afternoon, but was detailed by Francis to act as interpreter, if one was necessary, in dealing with the authorities at Menin, where Alan and his platoon were to take over the guarding of the river-bridge on the frontier. No interpreting, however, was needed, and after seeing Alan safely ensconced

we set off for Coucou again, only to lose our way on the road back (the maps being atrocious in this part of the world).

*May 14, Tuesday*

The next morning we were off and on the march again at some unearthly hour (about 5.30 a.m.), and at about 10 a.m. we were pleasantly surprised to find that we had reached our destination, a place on the outskirts of Courtrai called Watermolen, which was immediately and inevitably nicknamed Watermelon. Most of the company were billeted in a tumbledown old factory attached to a small flax-growing concern—a filthy place, with the floor covered with dirt and rubbish seemingly left from the last war, when it had also been occupied by troops.

Here we found a battalion of the Buffs in possession, and as we were to take over from them we had to lie up in a field of flax for two hours until they moved off. To the uninitiated like ourselves the smell of flax was at first completely overpowering, and, although it was characteristic of this part of the country, it was never stronger than it was here. But my chief reflection at the time was that a little more forethought would have made it possible for us to have started from Coucou at a reasonable hour, instead of leaving at crack of dawn and then hanging about pointlessly on our arrival. Loss of sleep has got to be faced sometimes in the Army ; but in this case it seemed completely unnecessary.

My own billet turned out to be a spotlessly clean private house near by, kept by an elderly couple neither of whom could speak anything but Flemish, which made communications difficult until a friend arrived who was able to act as interpreter. Poor old Johns was completely baffled : he got me a hot bath in my portable



apparatus ("warm water"—the only words of Flemish I ever mastered), and amid a murmur of voices from the back of the house I could hear him uttering polite and non-committal mumbles in response to a flow of completely unintelligible chatter from the old woman. I managed with some difficulty to order a meal that evening, and Alan came along to keep me company; but we had only just finished when I received a message to the effect that I was to sleep at Company H.Q. and answer the telephone. I took a last lingering look at my own comfortable bed, with its joys as yet tasted only in anticipation, and shut the door behind me.

I prayed for a quiet night, but about midnight the 'phone buzzed and a message came calling Francis to Battalion H.Q.; No. 12 Platoon, it turned out, was to go forth in the small hours (with Cecil in command) to patrol some near-by aerodrome. Then peace, more or less undisturbed, till morning, although I found it difficult to sleep with the threat of the buzzer hanging over me.

## CHAPTER V

### . . . AND BACK AGAIN

*May 15, Wednesday*

**I**N the morning it was my platoon's turn to go off on special duty: we were to take over the guarding of a V.P. on the railway at Courtrai. This was good news in that it promised us at any rate a brief spell of relative independence, and when one is continually at the beck and call of one's superior officers it is a blessed relief to escape from their clutches.

On arrival we found that the place we were to guard

was the marshalling-yard about a mile west of Courtrai station—a mass of railway lines and engine-sheds, liberally coated with coal dust, access being by means of a narrow concrete bridge. I established my platoon headquarters in a railway carriage inside one of the sheds, which afforded some protection from the smuts, even though it was not particularly comfortable and there was no form of cushioning on the seats.

Digger followed close on our heels, in order to decide what patrols and sentries would be required for the job we had been given. Acting on his suggestion, I paid a visit to the Belgian Quartier-Général in Courtrai, opposite the railway station, in order to agree upon a division of responsibilities between their sentries and ours. The atmosphere at headquarters was placid, and, apart from a few senior Belgian officers who hastily saluted me while I was still trying to assess their rank, I saw little sign of activity.

Digger posted one of my sections at Marck—a little station about a mile up the line to the west, where they proceeded to turn the waiting-room into a dormitory and generally make themselves comfortable. To reach Marck from Courtrai by road a slight detour was necessary, and on the way Digger decided to investigate a promising looking roadhouse, the “Chalet du Pottelberg,” which more than fulfilled our expectations by producing two wonderful glasses of iced Carlsberg lager—the first good beer we had tasted since leaving England.

*May 15–May 17*

The railway authorities at Courtrai were very helpful at a time when their tempers must have been sorely tried with a rush of refugee and other traffic passing through endlessly and seemingly in all directions. These refugees were one of the saddest sights I have ever seen. They



came, trainload after trainload in the blazing heat, some crammed like sardines in stuffy carriages, others herded together, helpless and bewildered, in goods trucks and cattle trucks. Some had been travelling for days ; many had no food or water ; all had with them only a few precious possessions. Not one knew where he or she was going. The result was indescribable, and is fixed in my memory all the more vividly because many of the trains stood there for hours before they at last clanked slowly on. Sanitary arrangements were simply non-existent.

And then there were the troop trains, full of Belgian soldiers of every kind, and with their carriages covered with chalk scribbles, "*Vive la France*," "*Vivent les Alliés*," "*A bas Hitler*," etc.—but all travelling, not towards the line, but away from it : I gathered that they were recent conscripts being sent back to France to complete their military training. They were all in high spirits and appeared quite confident that all was going well. It was the same story everywhere. Where were the Germans ? Why, of course, the Canal d'Albert still held out—that was an impregnable line. *Tout va bien—à bas les Allemands—vive la Belgique !* I was greatly encouraged, and began to have visions of remaining at Courtrai for some time while the Germans hammered in vain at the Albert Canal. But I soon learned the truth.

At the little *estaminet* just near the railway I met two or three young Belgians from one of the troop trains, and we all proceeded to fraternize over a glass of *Bière Export*. When the time came for their train to move off there was a sad farewell, and much exchanging of addresses. Sergt. Wolff, Charles, of the 57th Régiment de Ligne, where are you now ?

Needless to say, I had my work cut out dealing with alleged "*espions*." There were one or two cases of people who had the misfortune to be in possession of old Austrian

passports, issued before they were driven out as the result of Jewish persecution, and of course all these were immediately hauled up before me as "*Boches*." It was very difficult to "check up" on such cases—they all had correct identity papers, and all cut such a pathetic figure that, perhaps foolishly, I let them go. I remember in particular being roused one night from the floor of my railway carriage to deal with one old woman who could speak nothing but German and was completely bewildered until I found someone who could make her understand what was happening. Then there was a Polish Jew who was trying to get to the United States—Lord knows if he ever got there. In the end I had to give orders that I was *not* to be woken up in the small hours of the morning simply because someone looked slightly suspicious.

There was also some trouble with a number of railwaymen who were being evacuated with their families from more exposed parts of the country. One day I heard terrific sounds of argument and on going out saw a number of these fellows, led by a huge figure of a man, gesticulating furiously at one of the wretched railway officials. For a moment the situation began to look a bit ugly, so I called out my merry men with fixed bayonets and got them to march the offenders across the railway bridge, to the roadside, where I left them to cool their heels and their hearts for ten minutes or so while I went back and found out from the railway authorities what it was all about. It turned out that the agitators were railwaymen who had been sent back from Antwerp with their families, and, having got as far as Courtrai, had gone out into the town to find lodgings for the night. In their absence an order had come through to the railway authorities to send the whole lot back to Antwerp again, and the wives and children had been packed off accordingly. The men had come back to find their



families gone, and—not unnaturally—were extremely angry. The railway authorities were prepared to send them on after their families by the first available train; the men took the view that they were tired, and that it was for the railway authorities to bring their families back to them at Courtrai. Result: deadlock and the infuriated gesticulations which I have already described. I decided that the railway authorities won on the merits of the case, though it was obvious that they had acted foolishly, and the men were accordingly sent back to Antwerp. Even then it did not seem to have occurred to the railway officials that some of the wives might lose touch with their husbands altogether, and I suggested that it might be a wise move to telephone Antwerp Station with instructions to hold the trainload of women and children in one place pending the return of the men. This was done, and eventually peace reigned once more.

Further mild excitement was provided by an alleged parachutist who was reported to have been dropped close to our marshalling-yard, and was said to have been seen picking up a camera, also dropped by parachute—a tall story, but seemingly well attested.

On going down the road I found Belgian soldiers carrying out a search with much excitement but little energy: yes, I was told, he had been seen only a few moments before, going along a hedge, and he was wearing an "*imperméable noir*." His exact direction appeared to be obscure, and no attempt seemed to have been made to follow him until it was too late. However, I leapt into my platoon truck and searched around for about an hour before finally giving it up as hopeless. During this time I charged about dramatically, stopping anyone who was wearing black clothes, and in particular I was of very considerable nuisance value to the scores of priests with which the refugee stream was liberally sprinkled.

The main road was an extraordinary sight—not unlike the road leading from Wembley Stadium ten minutes after the end of a Cup Final. A long, unbroken column of refugees of all sexes and ages went monotonously by, hour after hour. Some were in saloon cars with a mattress tied on the roof; others in horse-drawn carts; others on bicycles—I saw one wretched old crone, who must have been at least eighty, being carried on a cross-bar. But the majority were trudging it along the dusty road, with bundles of their belongings on their shoulders, or carrying heavy suitcases bulging with everything they had been able to lay their hands on in the bustle of departure. If all these refugees were coming back in such haste, I began to ask myself, could it be that the famous Canal d'Albert was not, after all, holding the Germans as I had been assured?

Everything was so placid in every other respect, however, that it was difficult to believe that there could be any immediate threat to our peace of mind. True, we had a few air-raid warnings during the night, but nothing happened, although I was half expecting a bomb or two on my marshalling-yard, where all the engines and rolling stock of Belgium appeared to be assembled. The nearest bombs, as it happened, dropped at Watermolen, and three came down in a field in "B" Company's area, on the very spot which was to have been one of my section's alarm posts had we stayed there. As it was, the only casualty was one horse. The bombs dropped, which were of small calibre only, turned out to be of British manufacture, being marked (or so it was alleged) "W.D. 1937"! They were presumably part of Hitler's takings from Poland or Czechoslovakia.

I was a little anxious about the possibilities of sabotage in the huge timber yard which lay just the other side of the road; it was completely unguarded, and would



certainly have made a grand bonfire. Part of the place had already gone up in flames as the result of bombing shortly before our arrival, and some of the piles of charred planks were like the magic ferns that remain on the plate after a display of indoor fireworks.

On Thursday I took Johns along the railway line into Courtrai, and we went on a shopping expedition. Trade seemed fairly normal and the atmosphere was not unlike that of an English provincial town. I made a number of purchases, including a handsome fountain-pen for 45 francs ; but I had to restrain myself, for after being away from good shops for so long I felt like buying almost everything I saw.

*May 17, Friday*

Friday began badly. On the previous day we had had instructions to clean all our Bren magazines very carefully, as they had picked up a lot of sand at Camiers and weren't in a fit state for war. This we did in spite of the difficult conditions—a grimy goods-yard is no place to clean weapons. Unfortunately, some of my platoon's magazines were overlooked, having been with the A.A. post at the time the others were being cleaned, and there was a minor crisis when Francis discovered that some of the magazines still bore traces of sand. Diplomatic relations, however, were soon restored, and we drove off in the P.U. (accompanied by the C.S.M. and the grinning Dodman) to have a look at my isolated section at Marck. On the way back, about 12.30 p.m., our eyes lit upon the Chalet du Pottelberg, where I had drunk Carlsberg with Digger, and the temptation was too much for us. We swept the P.U. up the short gravel drive and parked it as unobtrusively as possible at the back of the premises ; and in we went.

Our original intention had been simply to look in for

a "quick one," but under the mellowing influence of Christmas ale and congenial surroundings (not unlike a smart English road-house) the time flew by, and Francis seemed in no hurry to leave. As the afternoon wore on I became increasingly uneasy at our prolonged stay, for I had a feeling that things might be happening elsewhere : but somehow we lingered on and persuaded ourselves that the war could get along very well without us. At last we reluctantly decided that we ought to be on our way, so we squared up and sallied forth a trifle unsteadily into the P.U.

On returning to the railway-yard the wind was knocked out of our sails by the news that in our absence a frantic search for Francis had been in progress : orders had been received to the effect that we were to pack up at once and leave Watermolen and Courtrai that very evening. It was a narrow squeak, and the whole incident is not one of which I am proud.

There followed a terrific rush to pack up the platoon truck and rejoin the company at Watermolen, but eventually we arrived in unexpectedly good time, much to the relief of Francis, who was, I think, a little doubtful as to whether we would show up at all. It was a sudden and unwelcome end to our short period of independence, and we were all the more reluctant to leave as we had only recently constructed a most handsome A.A. pit just in front of the timber-yard. However, this was only one of many digging labours that were in vain during these eventful weeks.

We reached the Battalion rendezvous outside the Queen Astrid Park about 8 p.m., and after waiting about under the trees for some time, largely on account of a false start (no doubt as a result of our expedition to the Chalet du Pottelberg, there was some confusion over the order of march), we eventually moved off. After the afternoon's



festivities my own head was not particularly clear and I certainly did not feel in good condition for a long march. I hadn't the faintest idea where we were going : I merely knew from my map that we were not going forward to meet the enemy. Soon after setting off Francis came up beside me and passed on the ostensible reason for our march—namely, that a German mechanized force had broken through at Sedan, and we were being sent back to mop it up. This was a bit too much for the credulity of even the thickest-headed private, for it did not require great powers of logic to realize that a slow and weary force of heavily-laden infantry could hardly be expected to catch up and destroy a fast mechanized column. So we continued to wonder : it seemed to me that the authorities were trying to maintain our morale by giving what they presumably thought was a convincing explanation for our withdrawal. I know now that our Brigade was in fact being sent back with a view to that projected counter-attack with the French which never took place.

It was sad to see the questioning faces of the inhabitants as we passed in the gathering dusk. Only a few days before we had been marching up to meet the enemy, and everybody's tail had been well up ; now here we were, seemingly in retreat before we had even fought, and leaving the villagers to their fate. Did they still think, I wonder, that their "impregnable" Canal d'Albert was proudly defying the Nazi army ? Or did I trace signs of agonized and yet unspoken doubt in their faces as they watched us pass by so silently and dispiritedly in the twilight ?

On we trudged, mile after mile, and after a time I knew that we were going back to France. That gave me new hope : perhaps after all the authorities had realized their mistake in ordering an advance into Belgium, and we were now going to take up a position

behind prepared defences, as we should have done in the first place. I little knew!

In the gloom we passed the frontier—I remember the tank obstacles and barbed wire, similar to what I had seen on the march up from France. These frontier defences invariably disappointed me; I suppose I had accepted too readily the assurances of the many wishful-thinking papers which had blazoned forth how much had been achieved during those first eight months of war, and what folly it was for the German High Command to delay its attack on the Western Front until the Allied defences had been made wholly impregnable. My own view (based, admittedly, on purely fleeting and superficial observations) is that precious little had in fact been done to improve our defences behind the Belgian frontier during that first winter of the war; although even so it was surely a gross error not to sit and wait behind them, such as they were, instead of going forward to meet the advancing German army. It was like trying to dam a stream in full flood, instead of taking the necessary precautions during the dry season beforehand.

As we marched on through the darkness I received orders that I was to go on as "B" Company representative on the advance party, so off I whisked—not too reluctantly, I admit—on top of a P.U. simply loaded with blankets and every kind of junk, having not the slightest idea of our destination, but secretly thankful for the unexpected "lift," and half-ashamed of myself for being thankful.



## CHAPTER VI BELGIUM ONCE MORE

*May 18, Saturday*

IN the early hours of the morning, about 3 a.m., we arrived at a very murky-looking cross-roads of which our first notification was a suspicious challenge from a French anti-tank rifleman lying in a ditch. Having satisfied him that we were not a German mobile column, we proceeded to make a hurried reconnaissance with a view to finding the Battalion somewhere to sleep when it arrived, which it was expected to do about dawn. I found that we were in a place called La Croix ; but no one seemed to know what the next move was likely to be.

If anyone likes tackling difficult jobs, I recommend him to try finding accommodation for seven or eight hundred men, at short notice, in a French village in the middle of the night. Even if one is lucky enough to find a farm that looks capable of accommodating a company, there remains the problem of waking (and placating) the farmer—and after considerable personal experience I am convinced that the French farmer is one of the soundest sleepers in the world.

We set out at once to find the largest farms, with an eye to big straw-filled *hangars* (Dutch barns) in particular. Heaven knows what the British Army would have done to solve its billeting problems abroad if it had not been for these *hangars*. We eventually managed to find room for the whole Battalion, which duly arrived in a pretty weary state at about 6 a.m. Those of us who had missed half the march naturally had to work fairly hard to make them comfortable, and it was not until getting on for noon that I saw the prospect of enjoying a little sleep

myself. It was not to be, however, for just as I was getting down to it I received orders that I was to go off on another advance party. So after lunch we clambered into the P.U. and hit the trail once more.

I had been told that we were to continue the move into France, heading in a south-westerly direction for Pérenchies ; but I was too tired to take much interest in the proceedings, and dozed fitfully in the back of the P.U., glancing out through the curtains from time to time, only to be choked by the dust of the road rising up behind us. But after we had been going for an hour or more I suddenly saw what was obviously a frontier post on the road, with rows of barbed wire stretching off on either side, and it looked extraordinarily like the frontier post past which we had marched on the preceding night. I could hardly believe my eyes. True, I had noticed for some little time, in my spasmodic and half-hearted attempts to follow on the map where we were going (never an easy task in the back of a P.U.), that the signposts to Roubaix and other places did not appear to be pointing in the right direction, but I had attributed this to my sleepy condition and to my own careless map-reading. Now, however, it dawned on me with a bump that we were going all the way back into Belgium again. It hardly seemed possible, but it was true enough ; the powers-that-be, not content with trying to exhaust the Battalion with a long night march, were now proposing to march them all the way back again, after only a few hours' rest, along the same route. Whatever may be the ultimate verdict about the B.E.F., there was at any rate one unit which had been marched off its feet before it ever went into action.

We arrived about 5 p.m. in Aelbeke, where the Battalion were to spend the night, and once more we began what one of my colleagues humorously described as



"blitz-billeting." More farms and more *hangars*: the rifle companies were usually accommodated in farms, with lofts or stables to sleep in, but H.Q. Company, on account of its size, was generally unlucky and had to sleep in the open air under the corrugated roof of a *hangar*. I found quite a pleasant farm for "B" Company, and in spite of the stream of refugees which was pouring into the town, and the consequent shortage of accommodation, I managed to secure beds in private houses for Francis and Cecil.

A number of refugees, mostly railwaymen, had already ensconced themselves in the straw under a big *hangar*, and at first I was inclined to turn them out from motives of security; but, being too soft-hearted to do that, I let them stay on the understanding that no further refugees were to be allowed into the farm. They turned out to be extremely useful, for I wanted some straw put up in the long granary loft where my platoon was to sleep, and I suggested to them that, as a slight token of appreciation for being permitted to remain, they might assist me by moving the straw from the *hangar* to the loft. This they did with a will, and I couldn't help laughing at the spectacle of about ten brawny men rushing about like bees at the entrance to a hive, all carrying huge bales of straw: once they had got going I had the greatest difficulty in inducing them to stop. The incident reminded me irresistibly of *L'Apprenti Sorcier*, and René Clair would have made the most of it.

The Battalion arrived in a pretty weary state at about 10 p.m., and after the usual performance over feet and feeding, got down to some much-needed rest. Alan and I dosed down on the floor of the farmhouse dining-room, and I thanked God for my Li-Lo.

May 19, Sunday

On the following morning I went off early, again on the advance party, and arrived round about noon at Vichte (which the Colonel always insisted on calling "Vitch-tea," making it sound like a variety of biscuit). Here we reconnoitred some farms where the Battalion could lie up for an hour or two after the midday meal; and then we ourselves went forward to a place which, we learned later, was called Steenbrugge, where it appeared that we were to take up a defensive position. Company boundaries were defined, and once again I got down to the task of finding some sort of accommodation for Company H.Q. and our three platoons.

This time, however, the task turned out to be only too easy: I wish that it could have been harder. All the inhabitants had already received orders to quit, and of the half-dozen cottages in our company area every one was empty. It was a heartrending sight. Everywhere were signs of a recent and hasty departure, with the furniture in disorder and drawers that had been hurriedly turned out in a frantic effort to remove at any rate the most precious of the family possessions. Papers of all kinds littered the floor, and faded family portraits stared up at me like ghosts. Sheets and blankets lay in a crumpled heap on beds still unmade, and in some cases a pot of coffee stood boiling on the stove: it was like the *Marie Celeste* all over again, only somehow a thousand times more tragic. In those few moments the cruelty of war came home to me with a vengeance, and I was filled with a surging hate for the nation that could cause such suffering. I did my best to put the more valuable items out of harm's way, optimistically hoping that at any rate something might be saved from the wreck against the day of returning.



The most pathetic sight of all was the live-stock that had been left behind. Cows had been left in the fields, pigs abandoned in their styes. A dozen tiny rabbits, which had evidently been released from their hutches at the final moment of departure, hopped gaily about the garden and approached me without a trace of fear; and a stray goat, trailing its chain, stared frostily at me and then proceeded to trot around behind me in the silence of that deserted place. Indeed, it was the silence of it all that most affected me; it was as though human life had suddenly been spirited away from the earth, and I was a privileged spectator of what was left.

While waiting for my company to arrive, however, I found that after all I was not alone. On the contrary, I suddenly caught sight of two quite solid-looking human beings not more than 200 yards away from me. They were behaving in a highly suspicious manner—looking towards the road which ran across our front, then suddenly taking cover for no apparent reason, and then continuing their hasty but stealthy progress towards the wood that lay further up the slope. For some minutes I watched them unperceived, after which I decided that it was a matter that needed investigation, so I hailed them, at the same time keeping my revolver handy in case of need and feeling ridiculously melodramatic in doing so. They pretended to be greatly amused at my suspicions, but, although they were dressed in battle-dress trousers and shirts, I wasn't taking any chances, and made them take me back to their H.Q. a little way up the road, and show me their A.B.s 64. These were duly produced from their jackets (which were in a lorry) and seemed to be in order. They were apparently two Welshmen, but they spoke with a dubious guttural accent and I wasn't really satisfied. They said that they belonged to some cookhouse, and their explanation of their behaviour was

that they had been wanting to get away up to the wood without their pals seeing. The whole story sounded extremely "phoney" to me, but I had work to do and couldn't very well go about with two arrested men on my hands: so I left them to their devices, with the intention of making further investigations later. This I did not, however, find time to do, although I have many times since regretted that I did not, for, in retrospect, I feel more than ever convinced that there was some "funny business" going on, and I blame myself for not having made further investigations.

When the company arrived, about 5 p.m., one of my first acts was to visit the one and only shop with Sergt. Johnson. There was hardly anything left in the place, but I managed to buy a tin of biscuits, a large amount of beef extract cubes (which we were destined never to use), and some boxes of matches. I don't think any of us fully grasped the fact that we were at last taking up a genuine defensive position. Then we received orders to dig in and came down to reality with a bump.

There was one somewhat ironic point about these orders. The company on our left, we were told, had one 3-inch mortar under command, and so had the company on our right. But the second 3-inch mortar was "imaginary"! I could not help smiling. In all our exercises before leaving England we had had to put up with "imaginary" weapons owing to a shortage of equipment; but I had never thought that when active operations began we should still find ourselves short of these essentials.

That night I lay in our little cottage in the small room that I had allocated to platoon headquarters, writing my diary and also a letter home. I felt a curious sense of impending doom, like a man in a condemned cell, for I had a nasty idea that within a comparatively short space



of time we should be engulfed in the advancing tide of the German army. In other words, I "had the wind up"—a natural enough feeling, I suppose, in view of the fact that it was the first time any of us had been within reasonable reach of a battle. I tried, without much success, to keep my letter cheerful: not that it reached home in any case, for from this time onwards no mail went out from the Battalion, and none came in. Meanwhile, I committed to my diary my innermost thoughts; I wish I had it by me now so that I could see what a man writes when he is under the influence of fear.

*May 20, Monday*

Early the following morning we had a brief moment of excitement; a German plane flew low from right to left across our front, with three of our fighters on its tail pumping it with machine-gun fire. It was an encouraging sight, though we little knew that they were the last of our planes we were to see for many days. Even then some crazy people in front of us proceeded to open fire on our own planes, and I wondered whether or not my "Welsh" suspects of the previous day were responsible. The German plane appeared to come down about a mile away to our left.

On the previous evening there had only been time to make a rough preliminary reconnaissance of my platoon's position, and almost with the first glimmering of dawn I was out marking our weapon-pits ready for digging—surely one of the most thankless of all the tasks that fall to the lot of a platoon-commander. By dint of careful thought and considerable toil he eventually marks out a position which appears to give the best possible field of fire. With less thought but greater toil his men get down to digging the positions that he has marked out. An hour—perhaps more—elapses. The weapon-pits begin

to take shape : the men grow more cheerful with the consciousness of work well begun. And then—along comes the company commander : he scans the position with an eye coldly critical. “ This weapon-pit is useless—not enough field of fire. That one is facing the wrong way—it is meant to be firing across the platoon on the right. And, my dear fellow, surely you haven’t put your left-hand section there ? Why, can’t you see, there’s not enough depth to the position : move it back towards that other field—no, not there, my dear fellow, much farther back ! Now hurry up : thanks to you, my dear fellow, your platoon is miles behind the other two. Hurry up and get going.” And off he goes, glowering, to repeat the procedure to the other platoons, leaving the unhappy platoon commander to break the news as gently as possible to his men that their labour has been profitless and that they must start all over again. Nor is that the end of the story ; for often it happens that the C.O. or Brigadier may visit the platoon’s position when digging is still further advanced, and make still more radical—and disheartening—alterations. All these critics have the advantage of the humble platoon commander : they have seen the company front as a whole, or the battalion front, or even the brigade front, and consequently certain modifications of a platoon position may strike them as essential. No doubt I sound unduly bitter ; but it is the bitterness of experience. Time and again hard work has been wasted in this way. Why stress the urgency of starting work at the earliest moment, if it has all got to be re-started as soon as a superior officer arrives on the scene ? Would it not be better, and a saving of time in the long run, if the company commander were to give orders that no work was to start until he himself had approved the positions taped out by the platoon commander ?

Simultaneously with the digging there was much work



to be done in clearing a field of fire. The land surrounding the cottages was a mass of standing crops, and these we had now to cut down quite ruthlessly in order to see what was in front of us. Someone miraculously produced a scythe, and of course bayonets were plied to good effect. But it was a distasteful task to have to destroy these unripened crops, sown and tended with such labour.

And then came the wiring—a job which went on laboriously and seemingly made little progress. The greater part of the company wiring party, under Sergt. Carr, was taken from my platoon, and yet, ironically enough, my platoon front was the last to be reached and remained unfinished even at the end. I learned afterwards that these men of mine, who were urgently needed for digging, had spent most of the day hanging about doing nothing, owing to a shortage of wire. These wiring and other similar parties are the bane of a platoon commander's existence in the field, and had plagued me since the earliest days of battalion and higher formation exercises in Dorset. With great industry my section-commanders would compile a roster for sentry-duty during the night, based on "Two hours on, four off" for each member of the section. All would go admirably until a message arrived from Company H.Q. about 11.30 p.m. asking for twelve men as a carrying party "forthwith." The textbooks speak glibly of ensuring an adequate period of sleep for all, but under such conditions it is virtually impossible to conform to such ideals, and rosters are confounded.

The livestock that had been left behind in our area caused a certain amount of amusement, and were even turned to some profit. An attempt by my "Bolshie" Pte. "Spud" to milk our goat (already mentioned) was only partially successful, and I do not know if any one

drank the result. Similar attempts were made upon the various cows that were loose in the fields : poor wretches, they were in desperate need of milking, but generally evaded all attempts to capture them, although after a time some success was achieved and several buckets of good milk were produced for the platoon by the exultant "Spud." Later, someone else killed a chicken, and there was much greedy anticipation among those who were to partake of it as they handed it to the platoon cook, young Pte. Ashley, who had set up a little cookhouse in a corner of the cottage. But alas ! before it was more than half-cooked the platoon received the order to move, and the bird had to be hastily devoured in its semi-raw state. Another chicken was hopefully dragged round hanging from the tail of the platoon truck for several days, until eventually, when opportunities for cooking remained consistently absent, it became too high for even the greatest *connoisseur* of game, and was finally despaired of.

Someone in a neighbouring platoon killed a pig—a noisy process—and it was devoured with a joyous disregard of the fact that there was no "R" in the month. During Monday afternoon I heard more squealings, apparently coming from "D" Company on my left, and I was temporarily uncertain whether it was another pig going to the slaughter or a woman being murdered. It sounded more like the latter, and I decided to investigate, but on doing so I found that it was merely some unfortunate youth in "D" Company who had shot himself in the arm.

The platoon truck was something of a problem. To begin with, the track leading up to my position was extremely narrow, and there was barely room for the truck to get up it ; and then, once arrived, it had to be concealed as far as possible from ground and air observa-



tion. Eventually, after some intricate manœuvring by my driver, L/Cpl. Johnson, we succeeded in tucking it away behind the cottage. Ammunition and reserve rations presented further difficulties. I had a box or two of reserve ammunition on the truck, and as I did not know when or in what strength the enemy might attack, I decided to unload the spare "ammo" and keep it in my platoon H.Q. weapon-pit. Loading it up again later was not so easy, as by that time we had two days' reserve rations with us—two or three large crates which had somehow to be squeezed on to the already heavily-loaded truck. In the end we had to put the tail-board down, and even then we only just managed to get everything on.

Our second night at Steenbrugge was spent in the trenches, and no one got very much sleep as we were busy with more digging and wiring. On such nights, now and later, Sergt. Johnson and I would take turns on duty, he sleeping for one half of whatever time was available, and I for the other half. On this particular night I had even less sleep than usual, for (apart from the shattering explosions of a 6-inch howitzer which for some reason opened up in the middle of the night immediately behind our position) my slumbers were interrupted by a message on the field telephone at Company H.Q. that I was to report to Digger at Battalion H.Q. at 0400 hrs. I hadn't the faintest idea what it was all about, and I little guessed what the following day held in store.

## CHAPTER VII

MAY 21st

BATTALION H.Q. was situated in the rear part of the wood that lay behind us, and very early the following morning I duly presented myself: fortunately, while waiting for Digger, I succeeded in scrounging a hasty cup of tea and a few biscuits, which were destined to sustain me for the greater part of the day. When Digger appeared I learned that the Battalion was going forward to take up a new position, half of which was being reconnoitred by the C.O. and Don, while Digger had paid me the compliment of selecting me to help him lay out the other half. So off we went in his P.U., bumping away down the dusty road, with Digger in front beside the driver, and myself and his batman in the back. We hadn't been travelling for more than twenty minutes when we came to an abrupt halt—in a place called Wortegem, as I later found—and on clambering out we beheld a most astonishing sight. We were in a cobbled street, which stretched away uphill to a village church about 400 yards away. Down this street towards us was straggling a disorderly mob of soldiers, grimy, bloodstained, and obviously badly scared, who pointed wildly up to the church behind them. "The Boches are up there," they shouted—"yes, just up there by the church: they'll be here any moment." And they hurried on, looking (if truth be told) very much like the popular British conception of the Italian army.

The C.O. and Don had halted on encountering this stream of fugitives, and Digger had pulled up behind them. Then came a still more remarkable sight. The Colonel's eye lit upon a grey-haired captain who was participating in the inglorious cortège. "What the Hell



do you think you're doing," he said. "Go on—just you get back into position on that hill. What's that? I don't give a damn if the Boche *is* coming. And from now on you take your orders from me, see? Now get hold of your men and take 'em back to that hill." He spoke in such a way that there could be no question of disobedience: he looked the wretched captain straight in the eyes and the poor fellow simply crumpled up. Within two minutes he was marching back again up the hill towards the church, with his men following him, well under control, for all the world as though they were going on a training route-march. It was an extraordinary change.

The Colonel put his hands in his pockets and stood with his feet astride, watching the men go back. Then he relaxed and chuckled. "Damned if I know whether the b——y Boche is up at the top of the hill or not," he said. And he continued to stand there quite coolly as he decided on his plan of action, while the rest of us (with frequent glances up the street) affected a not very convincing air of indifference to the dangers of the moment.

The upshot of it was that Digger and I were sent back to Steenbrugge, to telephone Brigade and inform them of what had happened, while the C.O. and Don remained on the spot to await developments. So off we bumped again down the road back to Battalion H.Q. On our return there was a slight interval while a telephone call was put through to Brigade by the Adjutant, after which I was informed that I was to lead a cycle patrol back to Wortegem. My instructions were to see whether the enemy really were in the village, and, if so, to make contact sufficiently to find out what their strength was, and generally to report back any useful information that I could about the situation. I was to proceed immediately, and there was no time to choose people from my

own platoon or company—I had to take any of the Battalion H.Q. personnel who happened to be available at that moment. The R.S.M. was detailed to collect some men for the purpose, but it was a good quarter of an hour before I got a “quorum”; and then I had to move off with half a dozen distinctly unpicked signallers on cycles that were of the worst “boneshaker” variety. We had not gone more than 200 yards down the sandy track that led through the wood to the main road before I found that I was already one man short; one of my patrollers, an oldish man, had evidently found either the pace or the prospects a little too hot for his liking.

Down the main road we sped, then turned left and along the front of my own company’s position. I saw one or two familiar faces in the wiring party as we passed, and I waved to them with exaggerated gaiety. I hadn’t the faintest idea what the next hour or two might not bring, and for all I knew we might run straight into the advancing enemy at any moment; and yet curiously enough I felt a strange exhilaration and rather a pleasant sense of excitement. After all, it was something of an adventure and I rather fancied the idea of “snooping about” near the enemy and trying to see without being seen. I had done it so many times in exercises that it was a change to be faced with the real thing at last. My chief regret was that my patrol consisted of men who were all strangers to me; I would have preferred a little party from my own platoon.

We bowled merrily along (except for one very soft and sandy piece of road where we had to get off and walk) and our first moment of excitement came when we found an enormous gun—fortunately British—pointing head-high across the road immediately in front of us. Every now and then I sent a scout ahead to make sure that the road was clear of enemy; but all we met were a



few isolated British soldiers coming back along the road in our direction ; from their reports it seemed that the Boche was certainly coming, but that he was still some way off, and at any rate not as far as Wortegem yet.

I decided not to take any risks, however, and accordingly on reaching the cross-roads just before Wortegem I gave the order to dismount and proceed on foot. I left one man (who had been lagging all the way) in charge of the cycles, with strict injunctions to await our return ; but being a little uncertain as to whether he might not have a *crise de nerfs* and leave us in the lurch, I decided to give him the moral support of a companion. This left me with only three men with whom to go forward, which I proceeded to do, keeping to the country on the left of the road on which we had met the C.O. earlier that morning. I had given every member of the patrol clear instructions as to our object, so that in case I was bumped off they could get back with the necessary information.

When we reached the main road at the top of the hill I met some soldiers who told me that the Middlesex (M.G.s) were in positions a good way further forward, and that the company commander concerned was just round the corner. I tackled him and he told me that his men were a mile or more in front, by an old windmill at a place called La Motte : he had heard nothing of the enemy reaching the village. I also stopped a car containing (as it turned out) the C.O. of the Middlesex, who passed on to me, for what it was worth, a report he had heard that the Boches had broken through and were threatening my Battalion's left flank. In view of this information I decided to return to the cycles, send back a report, and then to go farther forward on cycles in order to see what was really happening out in front. So back we went to the bottom of the village, where I sent

off one man back to Battalion H.Q. with the information so far gathered, namely, that no enemy were in Wortegem, and that they appeared to be not less than one mile beyond it, and also reporting the information given to me by the C.O. of the Middlesex about a possible break-through on the Battalion's left flank. I then left one of my three patrollers to keep my cycle-guard from getting lonely, and cycled back with two men up to the top of the hill again (hard going on the cobbles) and on towards the enemy. As we crossed the road at the top of the hill I saw the Divisional Commander (commonly known as "Snow-White") sitting resplendently in the back of a saloon car: he had just been talking to the Company Commander of the Middlesex, it turned out, and (so the latter told me) had said that he was bringing our 5th Battalion up forward of Wortegem.

We must have cycled the best part of a mile beyond the village when I decided that we were getting close enough to dismount and proceed on foot. We had come over one ridge, and were just approaching the crest of another, which I had been warned was likely to be dangerous unless due caution was observed. Accordingly I got down on the crest and tried to see through my field-glasses what was happening. But if I expected to see a spectacle of Nazi hordes being mown down by machine-gun fire, or two armies locked in a death-struggle, I was disappointed. The valley below me was wrapped in a thick haze which made it impossible to distinguish anything at all clearly, and there was obviously no hope of finding out exactly where the enemy were. I continued to lie there for about ten minutes, but on sighting what looked very like an armoured car or tank coming up the hill towards me (probably my own imagination) I decided that it was time to make a discreet withdrawal. As we came back through Wortegem



we met the 5th Battalion going up to their new position, led by their carriers.

We had at any rate discovered that the Germans were at least two miles the other side of Wortegem ; but I still hoped to be able to obtain a little more accurate information, and decided to have another shot up another road which led to a place with the delightful name of Bouveloo. Before setting off on this second expedition I sent yet another messenger back to Battalion H.Q. (my patrollers were now dwindling like ten little nigger boys) to tell them what was happening and to ask for orders. This messenger was to return and meet me at the end of the Bouveloo road, with instructions as to whether I was to return or stay out any longer.

We cycled a good way forward along this road (having to dismount every now and then owing to the soft sand), and then, meeting the main road, turned right and went another half-mile till we came to a fairly important-looking road junction. From here I had another look down into the valley (we were now viewing it more or less from the right flank), but I was none the wiser, except that I knew, at any rate, one more position which the enemy had NOT reached. Accordingly I cycled back, and, on returning, found my messenger with instructions that we were to report back to Battalion H.Q. It had not been a very profitable morning.

On arriving back, at about 1245 hrs., we found intense activity—the Battalion was just moving off ! At Battalion H.Q. itself, in fact, not many people were left. I gleaned the information that the Battalion was moving up (a parallel move to the 5th Battalion's, as I now realize), and I had obviously got to "look slippery" if I was to rejoin my company before they moved off. So I bade a hasty farewell to my signallers and sped off (still on my cycle, which I returned later) : I was just in time, for

"B" Company were actually coming round the corner into the main road as I came along. My platoon greeted me as one returned from the dead, and off we marched, not having the faintest idea what our destination was to be. I was told later that the wood where our Battalion H.Q. (and the 6-inch howitzers) had been was heavily shelled only half an hour or so after we left, so someone—presumably from the air—had done some good intelligence work for the enemy.

After marching for an hour or so, we halted in the middle of a small town—a town whose name will haunt me with memories until my dying day. It was Anseghem.

No one knew at first why we had halted. Francis merely came down the column, waved frantically at a white house on the left of the road, and shouted—"That's your area ; hurry up and get in"—and passed on to the next platoon. I took it that we were to be billeted in this house, although I hadn't the faintest idea what the general situation was : and I was just going round the house allotting accommodation when Francis dashed back again. "Hurry up !" he shouted, "get dispersed, away from these houses. No, not that side of the road, the other side. Hurry up ! *Don't you realize that the town is going to be shelled at any moment ?*"

No time for back-chat ; off we dashed into the open country that lay on the other side of the road, and I got my platoon into a nice comfortable ditch just deep enough to lie down in, about 150 yards from the road. Alan and his platoon were in the same area, a little farther away. We hadn't been there many minutes when the fun began. It was the first time we had been under fire, and it wasn't a pleasant experience, particularly as we hadn't then learnt to distinguish which ones were going well over and which were going to land close. The only previous time that I had heard shells whistling through



the air was at a demonstration near Salisbury—and the present circumstances were somewhat different !

Most of the shells fell in the town itself, although some were close enough to us to be uncomfortable. However, we kept our heads well down and continued to lie prostrate. I was next to Sergt. Johnson, and together we contrived to keep pretty cheerful : but it was a drowsy, sunny day, and I regret to say that after a little while I simply went to sleep. I think many others did the same.

How long I lay there I don't know, but it must have been a good two hours ; for it was not until about four o'clock in the afternoon that I was awoken from my peaceful slumbers by the realization that the shelling had—temporarily, at any rate—ceased, and by the sound of Francis screaming for the Sergeant-Major. Our halt had been called (I learned later) so that we could “ lie up ” while the C.O. received orders from the Brigadier ; and it was now Francis's turn to join the Battalion “ O ” Group and receive his orders. At first his shouts met with no response ; but after a full five minutes a very drowsy and sheepish Sergeant-Major at last presented himself. Almost immediately afterwards platoon commanders were sent for, and we received a very hurried instruction that we were to be ready to move off at a quarter to five. In the short interval remaining we were supposed to unload weapons, distribute ammunition, issue reserve rations, etc., all of which was a quite impossible undertaking in the time available. It was made more difficult still by the fact that all three platoon trucks were parked together along a short space of farm track, not much more than 30 yards long and 5 yards wide, so that the ground was a confused and seething mass of men, ration chests, ammunition boxes, Bren guns, mortars, anti-tank rifles, and so forth, with a liberal sprinkling of

farm carts and livestock just to complete the collection. One old sow in particular persistently got in everybody's way, and altogether the whole thing was a nightmare of disorder. Added to which there was still an occasional shell to be heard.

In the circumstances it was hardly surprising that it was an hour or more before we were finally on the road ready to move off: our transport was to be left where it stood. I found that I was in charge of the company, as Cecil had disappeared, and it was not for some time that I discovered the reason for his absence—Francis had been wounded and Cecil had gone ahead in his place to reconnoitre the position that the company were to occupy. So there we remained at the side of the deserted street, waiting for the order to move off, and without the faintest idea where we were to go when we did finally make a start. I did not know whether the rest of the Battalion was behind us or ahead of us, and the situation when someone at last gave us the order to move off was what might have been described by the B.B.C. as "somewhat obscure."

As we moved off (the order of march was Company H.Q., 10, 11, 12 Platoons) I sent Alan to the back of the Company as there was no officer at the rear: and, as it turned out, it was lucky for him that I did. Almost as soon as we moved off the shelling began again, this time a good deal more unpleasant because we were in the main street and it was right on top of us, and there was no longer any question of going to sleep in a nice comfortable ditch. Two or three shells in rapid succession whizzed just over our heads and landed twenty or thirty yards beyond us; it was our baptism of fire. For the first time in our lives we knew the real meaning of fear, and each time we heard the ominous whistle approaching we ducked down and crouched at the side



of the road for a few seconds where braver men would have gone on unperturbed. As we approached the church (where we were to turn off to the left) the shelling became more intense still, and one particularly close shell nearly changed fright into stark terror. I tried to laugh it off by shouting out with an unconvincing affectation of bravado, "It all adds to the experiences of life!" ; but I had hardly got the words out of my mouth when another one came crashing down almost at our feet. As resolutely as we could we continued to advance into the inferno, and the head of the company had just turned the corner when there was a louder whistle than ever and we all threw ourselves down on the ground with an uncomfortable realization that this one "had our name on it." There followed an almighty crash right in our midst, a burning pain somewhere in my left side, and then a momentary black-out : "so this," I remember thinking, "is what death is like." And then almost immediately I realized that I was still alive, sufficiently alive, at any rate, to hear a succession of loud moans from the Company Sergeant-Major on the other side of the road, and I was dimly conscious of him dragging himself painfully and laboriously along the other side of the road. More groans seemed to come from behind me, and at the same time I became aware of something hot and sticky in the neighbourhood of my left shoulder, and I knew that I had "stopped something" in the arm. For a fraction of a second—I am ashamed to confess it, but it should already be sufficiently obvious that I am no hero—the possibility of a nice "Blighty" wound crossed my mind ; but this idea was speedily ruled out when I found that I could move my arm without much difficulty. All these impressions flashed through my mind in the space of only a few seconds ; and then through the mists of returning consciousness there came from somewhere

behind me the voice of Eggie shouting my name in a tone of voice markedly lacking in sympathy.

I managed to stagger to my feet, and on tottering somewhat unsteadily towards him, was confronted by a grim scene.

In the sickening yellowish-red haze of mingled H.E. fumes and brick dust, wounded men, their faces contorted with pain, lay all around me. In the middle of the road was Sergt. Oke in obvious agony from a ghastly wound in his left thigh. He had obviously lost a lot of blood and was in a pretty bad way. Several others had also been wounded more or less seriously. Dodman had got a bit of shell in his shin, quite a nasty wound, but was taking it very well and still managed to raise his infectious grin as he sat by the side of the road. Another man had a clean wound through the heel, and a little way up the road lay a dusty and unrecognizable figure whose face already had the pallor of death. Of the personnel of Company H.Q., only L/Cpl. Greenfield and I had emerged comparatively unscathed.

Here I must confess that, albeit in ignorance and with the connivance of the Adjutant, I neglected my duty. As I now realize, I should have carried on leading the company up to its new position, and left others to look after the wounded. But at the time I freely admit that I never even thought of doing so, and the company went on with Alan in charge, while I remained to see what I could do for Oke and the others.

This was the first time I had had to cope with a situation of this sort, and the sight of Oke's wound sickened me. I managed to take a grip of myself, however, and did my best to fix shell dressings over the wound ; but it would have been a pretty hopeless task even if my knowledge of first-aid had been greater than it was. Oke himself was wonderful. Though fully con-



scious and in great pain, he looked up at his friends as they went by, shouting out : " The bastards . . . they've got me . . . I'll get even with them for this . . . Good luck, Jim . . . Cheerio, Jack . . . All the best, Bill " —and so on.

Meanwhile the shelling of the corner continued unabated. Poor Oke quivered as each one whistled towards us and crashed seemingly within a few yards ; and several times, when we heard one coming particularly close, Eggie and I had to throw ourselves down and seek what little shelter the brick wall afforded. It was a terrifying experience.

With shells continuing to fall we dealt one by one with the other wounded, and sent back desperately for an ambulance to take them away. It seemed an age before one at last arrived. I looked round at the dismal scene, happier now that I knew the wounded had a chance of being looked after. There was the fatal corner, a mass of smoking rubble with that sickly smell of H.E. still lingering. Twenty yards away, an unrecognizable corpse ; and all round me in the road the traces of disaster—pools of blood, torn and dust-covered pieces of equipment, discarded rifles, and battered tins of bully beef. I collected a few of these tins, which I thought might be useful later, and also a rifle ; and then at last Eggie and I left that ill-fated spot and moved up to find the new positions which had been occupied.

I learned on the way that Gerry (who had been commanding " D " Company) had been killed, while Francis, Peter, and Ketton had all been wounded. The 21st May had been a black day for the Battalion, with a vengeance.

On reaching the Battalion area I had some difficulty in locating " B " Company's position, but when I eventually arrived I found that Cecil had put the platoons into their areas, No. 12 Platoon being on the right, 11 on

the left, and 10 in reserve behind. Sergt. Johnson had just allotted my platoon's section positions, and digging had already begun.

After a slight adjustment of the platoon position (Sergt. Johnson had put the left-hand section too far away, where it would have been isolated) digging began in earnest and went on all through the night. Digging at night, however desirable in theory, is never easy in practice. To begin with it requires very intricate organization to arrange for the right number of men to be digging and sleeping respectively. One may make out the most beautiful roster, giving every man two hours on and four hours off, as taught in the textbooks ; but textbooks, as I have said before, conveniently forget all about the men who are whisked away from the platoon at a moment's notice in order to form a wiring party, or to go back to " B " Echelon to collect food, or to make up a standing patrol two hundred yards in front. On this occasion, too, the men were very tired, and to keep even a small working party going in each section post required the strictest and most constant supervision. Time and again, on going round, I found no work at all proceeding in one of my three sections ; the section commander, no doubt because he was an older man than most, was particularly affected by fatigue, and it seemed that nothing could rouse him. I woke him up three times and told him to see that at least two men were working ; but it did little good, for always, when I next went round, he and his section had once again relapsed into slumber. He was doubtless dreaming peacefully of the 'bus on which he used to be a conductor in Birmingham, and was certainly unaware of the unpleasant proximity of the German army.

To anyone who was awake it was clear that the enemy were not in fact very far away ; for the dark landscape



in front of us was lit by intermittent flashes and the red glow of burning buildings. The tide of fire was rolling towards us. Yet in the farm immediately behind my platoon position the occupants still remained, seemingly unaware that the battle was almost upon them. I went in there before darkness fell, and over a most welcome glass of milk I strongly advised them to get away while they could ; yet they seemed hardly able to believe that there could be any immediate danger. Other farms in front, I told them, were already ablaze, and theirs might well be the next—and as if to stress my argument a shell landed in the farmyard almost immediately I had left. That evidently decided them ; and not very many minutes later I saw them scuttle out of the door, laden with a few essentials, and disappear into the dusk. What, I wonder, happened to them ? Did they get safely away ? Have they returned to their home—and, if so, did they find the Alsatian which they abandoned in its kennel, and the cows in their stall, and the parrot and the love-birds in the aviary ?

Some time after dark—I do not know when it was—I made my way back to Battalion H.Q. and saw Freddie, who put a dressing on my arm. The wound was only a superficial one—a small fragment of shell had hit me, although what exactly happened is a mystery to this day. There were two holes in my arm and a clearly discernible passage where something had gone through it : yet there was only one hole in the arm of my battledress, and some months later I was duly X-rayed and a minute fragment of metal was removed by Freddie.

So ended May 21st, 1940—the longest day of my life.

## CHAPTER VIII BEHIND THE ESCAUT

*May 22, Wednesday*

IN the early hours of the morning I heard that the C.O. had been round to Company H.Q. and had said that every man must have six feet of earth to shelter in by morning. Our weapon-pits were so far barely half that depth, and at dawn everyone set to work feverishly. Luckily it was fairly easy digging and we made good progress. Platoon headquarters was not in a very advanced state, but I did not worry unduly about this as there was a perfectly good ditch by the side of the road which could be used if necessary, and which did in fact turn out to be very useful later.

Some time after breakfast (I can't remember what it consisted of, or indeed how or when our meals arrived) Sergt. Johnson and I went into the deserted farm on a voyage of exploration. We did not find very much. The cellar yielded a large bowl of creamy milk, which was duly distributed ; and I suppose we could have had an ample supply if only there had been the time and the opportunity to milk the cows that were in the stalls—abandoned, poor wretches, to their fate. Also hanging in the cellar was a luscious-looking ham, but it was uncooked, and we were not hungry enough to face it in that condition. In one of the outhouses were some hens, but, alas, no trace of any eggs. And in the yard there were about thirty little yellow chickens, a pathetic sight, all scurrying about eagerly, expecting to be fed. I put down several handfuls of maize for the hens, and eventually, after something of a search, found a sack of grain from which I fed the chicks. I also opened the door of



the aviary in order to give the exotic-looking parrot and his companions at any rate a chance of survival.

Such visits to the farm (which was only fifty yards behind us) were never salutary. Anyone entering through the gate was evidently in full view of an enemy observer, for the result was invariably an outbreak of shelling. After a time this became more than mere coincidence, and I gave orders that the farm was to be avoided as far as possible ; and on the few other occasions I entered I crawled ignominiously through the hedge at the side. But such precautions were of little avail : the Germans could see us digging, and later in the day they showed all too clearly that they knew exactly where we were.

Later in the morning I received instructions from Battalion H.Q., over the field telephone, that I was to go out and find out who were on our right front. We had seen troops in the distance apparently digging in, and evidently Battalion H.Q. was as much in the dark about them as we were. As for the enemy, no one had any idea about how near or far they might be.

It was with some sense of excitement, therefore, that I selected L/Cpl. Marchant and Pte. Hughes (two of my brawniest and most reliable men) and set off along the road which led down the right flank of my platoon position. At first we moved fairly cautiously, for there was an atmosphere of uncanny stillness which, we imagined, seemed heavy with danger. As we neared the foot of the slope I left the road and struck off cross-country, till we came to the railway line and a deserted station just beyond. After considerable peering over walls, we satisfied ourselves that the coast was clear, and crossed the line, and the street beyond, with footsteps that clattered eerily in the silence. Continuing for another mile or so across country, we came upon a little village where we met some British troops, who turned

out to belong to the Black Watch, and guided us to their lines. The position which they held consisted of an exceptionally well-prepared, deep-dug line of trenches with a clear field of fire across open country for a good half mile or more. They had a number of Vickers M.G.s to assist them, and I thanked my stars that I was not one of the Germans who might have to attack them. I was then conducted to the Battalion H.Q. at a house in the village, where I saw the second-in-command, who "put me into the picture." He was not pleased with life. It appeared that after hours of careful digging, the result of which I had just seen, they had received orders to the effect that they were a little too far back to correspond with the general line, and that in consequence they were to move forward three-quarters of a mile or so and take up a new position. They were to leave at about noon. I expressed my sympathy and departed.

I have often wondered since who ordered that move forward by the Black Watch. Had he, I wonder, any conception of the labour that had gone to the preparation of that superb defensive position which they were now ordered to abandon? In the light of subsequent events it was, I am convinced, a tragic mistake.

Our return journey was uneventful. Once again we came to the deserted street and the railway line beyond, though this time we spent a few minutes among the houses in the hope of finding something that might be useful, but without any luck, except for an old camp stool which we looted unashamedly. As we re-crossed the railway I saw the name of the station painted in blue and white on a wall. Had I seen it before, I should not have lingered so readily. It was—ANSEGHEM.

We returned to our position through No. 12 Platoon's lines, though not before we had been plied with some



delicious hot coffee which they had appropriated from a near-by farmhouse. I reported the result of my investigations to Battalion H.Q. over the telephone, and returned to my platoon, where I arrived just in time for dinner.

Early in the afternoon—it must have been about two o'clock—we were subjected to a most unpleasant and protracted period of shelling, which was as accurate as it was intense. For something like two hours the shells rained down all round us without a pause, and I do not think it is any exaggeration to say that there was never less than a shell a minute during the whole of that time—and very often there were considerably more ! There was nothing which one could do except lie low until it was all over, with a subtle admixture of self-protection and frontal observation : I must, however, confess that the former tended to predominate. I myself cowered ingloriously in my ditch (the platoon headquarters trench had not yet been dug sufficiently deep to afford much protection), and listened to the whine of the shells as they approached or passed over, screwing myself up smaller than ever from time to time as something dropped particularly close with a reverberating crash, sending a blast against my legs for all the world as if it had missed me by inches. None actually came so close as that ; but several landed within a radius of fifty yards of us, and some were as close as twenty. I thought many times that my last moment had come, and I tried, with some success, to console myself by reflecting that we were perfectly safe in our ditch from everything except a direct hit, and, if we did get a direct hit, we should not know anything about it. I recommend this philosophy to others who may at any time be similarly situated : it has at least the elements of comfort. The demoralizing effect of the shelling was heightened by the drone of an

aeroplane which circled overhead all the time, quite low. I believed at first that we were being bombed as well as shelled, but in fact it was nothing but a Henschel 126 reconnaissance plane "spotting" for the German artillery. For an hour or more it flew overhead doing its work in a tranquil and leisurely manner, without a shadow of interference either by anti-aircraft fire or by R.A.F. fighters, for all the world as though it were taking part in a practice shoot over friendly territory. This was not the last time that we had to endure the sight of German planes doing what they liked in the sky; and the bitterly sceptical attitude which many B.E.F. men adopted—quite unjustifiably, as most of us afterwards realized—towards the achievements of the Royal Air Force was entirely due to such experiences. To lie helpless in a trench or ditch while enemy aircraft do what they like overhead is one of the most demoralizing ordeals that a soldier can face. "Where is our Air Force?" we asked ourselves all the time, with a savage fury: and the same question was differently expressed by our C.O., who, that afternoon, sent a typical message to Brigade H.Q.—"Please may I have half a Hurricane for half an hour?"

The presence of so many helpless livestock in a country engulfed by the advancing tide of war made the scene of battle, already hideous enough in itself, ten times more sinister and horrible. Terrified cattle, many of them wounded by bullets or shell fragments, charged madly about in the midst of our positions; and—most ironic touch of all—at the height of the shelling I looked up to see a love-bird, freed from his cage at the farm, carolling blithely away on a barbed-wire strand immediately in front of me. It was a song such as a lark would sing in the ecstasy of high summer, or a robin as he perched unafraid on the gardener's wheelbarrow: and in



that moment I suddenly felt desperately ashamed of humanity.

After what seemed like an eternity the shelling at last ceased, the drone of the plane died away into the distance, and we had an opportunity to look round to see whether any one was still alive. I fully expected to find that we had suffered very heavy casualties, and yet in fact not a single man had been even slightly wounded. Of the shells that had fallen near us, some had been twenty yards or so short and others a similar distance behind us, while others had whistled over us and into the area of Battalion H.Q. and the R.A.P. over the crest of the hill, where Freddie, I gathered later, had had a nasty time with shells falling all round his impromptu hospital. All my men had kept well down and had been as frightened as I had been—all except Pte. Baldwin, one of my more intelligent privates, who had sat reading a book throughout the bombardment.

Once again digging was resumed. By this time the weapon-pits were pretty well completed, but there had been no time for crawl trenches to connect them, and such luxuries had to be dispensed with. Other events were already occupying our attention.

Throughout the afternoon the lower ground in front of us, and the more distant slopes to our right front where I had seen the Black Watch earlier in the day, had been the scene of considerable, if somewhat obscure, activity. In particular the village to our left front, which was reputed to hold some of our machine-gunners, had come in for some heavy shelling. The church appeared to be the principal target, as always on such occasions; the reason presumably being that a church spire can be picked out both from the map and on the ground, and thus affords a convenient aiming-mark to which the range can be judged with perfect accuracy. Shell after shell

landed in the valley below us ; but always from amid the cloud of high explosive and brick dust it emerged triumphantly erect. Towards the end of the day the spire was still standing, although by then tilting a little as a result of its ordeal.

Later in the afternoon we saw unmistakable signs of an impending attack, the first of which was the appearance of white Verey lights a mile or more away to our front, and slightly left. These Verey lights went up at regular intervals, always in our direction, and each time appearing a little closer than before. Of the enemy himself there was never a trace. To troops who had as yet had no experience of actual fighting this silent and relentless advance seemed uncanny and rather frightening. If only we could have caught one fleeting glimpse of the human beings who were firing those Verey lights we should have felt that we were at grips with something tangible ; but as it was one gained only the impression of a mysterious force approaching closer and closer, and there seemed to be nothing to impede its coming. The enemy's fieldcraft must have been good, for even when they were quite close to us they remained invisible to the naked eye and to field-glasses alike.

The moral effect which the Germans achieved by their use of Verey lights was intensified by other events. In the valley to our front, about threequarters of a mile away, a mass of men suddenly appeared marching along the road in close formation : at first they were seen moving from right to left, as though going towards the enemy, and some of my men shouted out that they had seen the Germans—"there they are, sir, on that road—just look at 'em. What a target !" I was pretty certain that they were British troops, although I was glad that in any case they were out of range, so that the question of opening fire did not arise. Not long afterwards what



appeared to be the same body of troops came hurrying back from left to right in evident confusion. I wish I knew the true history of that episode. What I believed at the time, and still believe, was that the Black Watch had been caught by a German attack soon after they had reached their new—and unprepared—position, or even while they were still on the way up to it. This could have given them no chance of effective defence, whereas if only they had been allowed to remain in their previous positions, I am convinced that they could have held up any attack for a very long time.

Not long after this a number of men came running up the slope towards us. Again the obvious assumption was that they were from one of the other battalions in our brigade. When they reached our position I could see that they were pretty badly shaken; they were led by an N.C.O. and were—he said—“all that was left of the ‘Second.’” Experience since then has taught me wisdom, and I know now that this phrase is a favourite with all troops who have got away. At Wortegem we had met “all that’s left of the —”; and on our return to England the most exaggerated and totally unfounded stories were told of units of which “only three men had returned.” The effect of such stories on men who are still awaiting the enemy’s attack is deplorable: it creates in their minds an impression that an inferno is about to overtake them, in the face of which they will have no hope of survival. After all, if those in front of them have been unable to resist, why should they themselves be able to do so? If others have fled after suffering heavy casualties, is it not better that they should make their get-away before meeting a similar fate? That is the train of thought engendered by those who thoughtlessly exaggerate the achievements of the enemy in order to glorify themselves.

I did my best to rally these stragglers, for I realized that a fourth section would be a valuable addition to my platoon strength in the face of the attack which now appeared unlikely to be delayed much longer. The idea of renewing the conflict, however, obviously did not appeal either to the N.C.O. or his men, and I could not altogether blame them. On looking round for them a few minutes later I was not surprised to find that they had vanished. They had seen enough of the war for one day.

Meanwhile the Verrey lights were continuing to go up in front of us, mostly to our left front, and the main attack appeared to be coming from that quarter. Immediately to our left was a projecting spur with an extensive area of dead ground beyond it, covered by "A" Company on our left. It was impossible, owing to the conformation of the ground, to see what was happening ; but every time a Verrey light went up it called forth a veritable hail of lead from the Vickers M.G.s of the Middlesex, who were supporting us. The rattle of these guns, like the monstrous ticking of hundreds of tape machines, echoed away across the valley after each spell of firing. I do not think they ever saw anything much to fire at ; they merely swept the area where any Verrey light was seen. Whether the main body of the attackers was there I do not know ; it seemed unlikely that they would give away their position quite so obviously. And yet someone must have been there to fire the Verrey light ; and it may be that the German infantry found it worth while to give away their approximate position as a price for establishing a clear system of communication with their artillery, aircraft, and other troops. Certainly a good many different signals were used, each with a special meaning.

In spite of the constant rattle of our machine-gunners



the Verey lights to our left front appeared to be coming ever closer, and I watched with some anxiety for "A" Company to fire the Green-White-Green which was the prearranged "S.O.S." signal. I had a nasty idea that the first thing I should know would be the appearance of some Germans over the ridge on my left, so I was particularly interested in the success or failure of "A" Company to hold their front.

However, my attention was soon distracted from such anxieties by the approach of Verey lights immediately in front of my own position. This was accompanied by what I took to be the famous "box" barrage, designed to isolate a defensive position which is about to be attacked: shells started falling quite systematically on our left and right, and also in a line immediately behind us. Closer and closer the Verey lights came, till it seemed that the enemy must be somewhere right at the foot of the open ground that stretched down in front of our position; but still we saw nothing, however carefully we searched the ground. True, there was a good deal of cover, but all the same it seemed extraordinary that we had seen not a sign of the enemy apart from his Verey lights. And so we continued to wait and watch, a little nervously.

Meanwhile the German attack along other parts of the Allied front must have been making swifter progress, for during the evening the Battalion received orders to withdraw—orders which reached me via Cecil at about 8.45 p.m. "Thinning out" was to begin at 9.15 p.m., and the front was to be denied to the enemy until 9.45. And so we faced what we had always been brought up to regard as one of the most difficult of all operations of war—a night withdrawal when in contact with the enemy.

Orders for the withdrawal were very similar to what we had practised often enough during training in Eng-

land : it was principally a question of deciding which section was to move first, fixing a platoon rendezvous, and leaving Brens to the last to cover our withdrawal. I had just finished giving out these orders when an outburst of shouting from my right-hand section showed that something was happening. I dashed across to their position and found that the shouting was directed at some troops who were approaching up the slope towards us, dressed, apparently, in greatcoats and battledress. It was alleged that these men had shouted "Don't fire—we're the Jocks," and every man in my platoon seemed either to be calling out to them, or else to be shouting to his neighbours to tell them not to fire. By this time the light was fading fast and it was difficult to see at all clearly ; but as I had been waiting for an attack from that very quarter I was immediately suspicious. For some seconds I tried in vain to make myself heard : then, when some sort of silence had at last been restored, I cupped my hands and shouted out at the top of my voice : "If you're really the Jocks, get on to that track"—pointing to the little road that ran down on our right. They paid no attention to this, and as I was not taking any chances I picked up a rifle (my batman's) and shot at one of the men on the right. Down he dropped, and someone on my right accounted for another : but still the greatcoated figures continued to advance, shouting excitedly to one another. For a few uneasy moments I was half afraid they might, after all, turn out to be remnants of the Black Watch, although even if they had been it would, I think, have been right to open fire in such circumstances : "if in doubt, shoot" is an essential principle of defence. As they approached, however, we could hear them jabbering gutturally for all they were worth, and one man in particular was shouting out something that sounded like "Hochleben," but as I



knew no German I was none the wiser. By this time the few that remained standing were barely twenty yards away : but they came no nearer than that. As the last German dropped, Cpl. Duval, one of my section commanders, shouted out that he was wounded. I learned later that in a fit of bravado he had jumped from his weapon-pit with the object of capturing one of the approaching Germans, and had been shot in the thigh—a nasty wound, too, as it turned out, for the shot had touched off a loose round that he was carrying in his pocket, and this had gone broad-side into his leg. All this took place in an atmosphere of general confusion, and there was none of the impressive calm which prevails in the Hollywood version of such scenes. What with the shouting and whine of bullets (by this time we were under machine-gun fire from the foot of the slope, to say nothing of all the firing that was going on to the right and left of our position), it was extremely difficult to know what exactly was happening. The enemy appeared to be attacking strongly against No. 12 Platoon's position on our right, where the situation was made all the more obscure for us by the deepening gloom and by a belt of trees which lay between us along the edge of the road. As it was past zero hour for "thinning out" I decided to begin our withdrawal immediately, and we packed up as rapidly as possible in the gathering darkness, though I soon found that withdrawal in theory and withdrawal in practice are two very different things. With the aid of some of the platoon's "strong men" we managed to get Cpl. Duval away, and later put him on to a carrier. Though he must have been in considerable pain, he was very plucky indeed.

On reaching the road we proceeded past Battalion H.Q. (where Lyn was desperately trying to reel in some of his telephone line under the most difficult conditions)

to a Battalion rendezvous, where we lay up in a field for ten minutes and sorted ourselves out. We then moved off as a battalion, happy in the thought that we were leaving Anseghem well behind us, and secretly thanking our stars that we still lived to fight another day—not that we had done much fighting so far! Our carrier platoon stayed on for a while with orders to cover our withdrawal—a task which consisted (I gathered afterwards) of blazing away in the darkness at nothing in particular.

After a nasty moment not long after the start, when we came to a fork where no one knew the right way (the indecision was only resolved by the Adjutant, who hurried up and told us to take the left-hand road, although as it turned out later it was literally a shot in the dark) we settled down to a long and wearisome march all through the night.

We received orders from the C.O. to dump our picks and shovels by the side of the road, in order to lighten our loads: these were to have been picked up by the Battalion transport that was following, but there was a misunderstanding of some kind and much of what was dumped was never seen again.

We were all dead beat, and much too tired to take any notice of our route. Many, including myself, were so exhausted that we slept as we marched—a feat I should never have considered possible if I had not experienced it. As I jogged along I kept colliding with L/Cpl. Biggs in the middle of the road, both of us having been sleep-walking from one side of the road to the other. Even when I was not actually asleep I lost all sense of distance between myself and the troops I was following, and moved in a dream-world in which bushes and trees at the roadside became nightmare figures of fantastic shape: while I remember every now and again wondering at the wall-



paper of the corridor along which I was walking, only to realize suddenly that the road and the hedges formed my corridor, and the wallpaper was nothing more than the night sky—a shapeless mass of gloom relieved only by the blaze of occasional buildings on fire. The nightmare effect was completed by the companionship of a half-moulted goat, which attached itself unasked to our column, rubbing against our legs and tripping us up. Wretched animal—the light of dawn revealed it still plodding along with us gamely but wearily, but from that time on I saw it no more.

## CHAPTER IX

## PAWNS IN THE GAME

*May 23, Thursday*

IN the first glimmerings of early morning we reached Courtrai—a very different Courtrai from the one I had left only a few days before. No longer were the streets crowded with busy shoppers, with little knots of people gathered here and there, contentedly murmuring, “*Canal d’Albert*”; in its place we found a city of the dead. The shops were empty skeletons with bare and shattered windows whose glass littered the cobbles; broken wires trailed in a tangle on the pavements, like monstrous creepers in the overgrown garden of a house long deserted; and, as in Anseghem, not a sound but the tramp of our own tired feet along the roadway.

Beyond Courtrai we found scattered signs of preparation to resist the advancing enemy. First of all a few isolated Belgian anti-tank guns facing up the road; but they seemed old and rusty, and there was little sign of crews or ammunition. Then over a bridge—thankful to

have crossed it just before it was blown up—and along the bank of a canal. Here a short halt, during which we learned that the R.E.s were about to blow up a barge near-by ; and almost immediately there was a shattering explosion and fragments of all kinds rained down upon us. Then on once more until at last, about eight o'clock, we came to Wevelghem aerodrome. This was where, on our way up into Belgium, we had first seen the effects of German bombing—houses pitted with bomb splinters, craters in the road and all over the aerodrome itself, burnt-out aeroplanes on the far side of the landing-ground, and the charred remains of a lorry outside the entrance. "C" Company had been left to guard this aerodrome while we were on the line of the Escaut ; and, having missed the nightmare of Anseghem, they were a good deal fresher than we were.

We remained at Wevelghem all day, doing nothing, which was a blessed change, as we were dead to the world. I had a shave in the wash-house, followed by a shower, the joy of which can be imagined. We also had an excellent lunch in the atmosphere of a peace-time camp, and temporarily forgot the existence of the German army. It was only a brief respite, however, and with the approach of evening I had a nasty idea that at any moment we should suddenly find the enemy arriving in force. There didn't appear to be very much to stop him.

About 7 p.m. I received orders from the C.O. to go and collect some reinforcements for the Battalion ; but as I was working out my route they arrived, so that I was spared any further anxiety over them. Not long afterwards, as dusk fell, I was instructed to go on with Digger and other company representatives as an advance party : the glad news had arrived that the Battalion was to proceed to "rest billets" forthwith. Great was the



rejoicing. Somehow I piled myself into the back of a P.U., and off we went—whither, no one but Digger knew.

I remember very little of the journey, for I was still so weary that I could not keep awake: but at intervals throughout the night I was woken up by the P.U. stopping with a jerk. Then followed mutterings from Digger and occasionally a question shouted through the darkness at some person or persons unknown—"Where the Hell are we?" Poor old Digger was evidently having some difficulty in finding the way, which is not surprising in view of the French maps. I sympathized with him as I stirred in my slumber; but I was too weary, and too firmly jammed in the back of the P.U., to show my sympathy in any practical form.

*May 24, Friday*

At last, in the small hours of the morning, we reached our destination, which turned out to be La Madeleine, a suburb of Lille. I was still heavy with sleep, but with great difficulty I roused myself sufficiently to squeeze out of the P.U. and accompany Digger to the local police station. It was only about 2 a.m., and pitch dark; but we had to find accommodation for the Battalion before they arrived, which they were expected to do about 6 a.m. By now, however, I was growing accustomed to this sort of problem.

The police showed no particular enthusiasm at being woken up at such an ungodly hour, but the equivalent of an inspector roused himself and came to our assistance with fairly good grace considering the circumstances. Digger proceeded to explain our wants to him in some of the most execrable French I have ever heard. "Nous voulons accommodation pour le Battalion" (pronounced as in English). "Ah, mais oui, cela doit être assez facile: il y a beaucoup de maisons."—"Vooz away accommodation poar

sank cent soldiers?"—"Cinq cent soldats? Ah, cela sera plus difficile . . . Peut-être . . . Mais, les clefs? . . . impossible jusqu' au matin . . ." "Eh, what's that? What's he saying?"—said Digger, turning to me. I explained. "Mais," he gesticulated at the rather bewildered Frenchman, "c'est necessaire, comprenny? Le Battalion sera ici dong trois hours"—and he held up three fingers in case there should be any doubt about it. The inspector shrugged his shoulders, collected a few keys, and we sallied forth behind him.

For an hour or two we toured the streets both in the P.U. and on foot, with varying success. Many houses were locked and there was no chance of getting the keys until the morning. One colossal house, in particular, standing in its own grounds (with plenty of trees to conceal our transport), defied all attempts to open doors or find loose windows. Our little policeman was running out of likely addresses by this time, and the question of finding sufficient accommodation for the Battalion was becoming desperate. The front of the building consisted of huge sheets of glass, and it was clear that one of these would have to be broken. Our French friend was at first inclined to expostulate, but I think he realized soon enough that it would be a short-cut to take him back to his bed; so I prepared myself for the crash and gave the great window a terrific kick with my heel, and in another minute we were all inside.

It was pitch dark, but by the light of a match we could see that it was a very big house capable of taking, at a pinch, two complete rifle companies. The idea of lighting matches appalled the little inspector, for there was no black-out whatever, and he gasped "*Attention—la lumière*" in a horrified whisper, as though the Germans were listening. His protest appeared to be justified when the striking of a second match shortly afterwards was greeted



by a terrific explosion seemingly from the grounds immediately outside. Yet there was no drone of any aeroplane overhead, and the explosion must, I suppose, have been due to a delayed-action bomb. Further explosions followed at intervals for the next hour or so, and as we were continuing our tour of La Madeleine a little later, while the glimmerings of first light were fighting with a heavy ground mist, we passed one point on the road where the sickening fumes of high explosive were still lingering. One bomb exploded not very far from where the head of our "B" Echelon transport was waiting at the outskirts of the town, which again added to the illusion that we were the victims of a deliberate air attack.

Soon after dawn I was sent by Digger to meet our "A" Echelon at a prearranged rendezvous; but the time originally fixed for meeting them had long since gone by. I was distinctly uncertain about the route, and had some doubts as to my ability either to find the rendezvous or to lead them back into La Madeleine if I did meet them. Luckily I came on the column about three miles out of La Madeleine: they had grown tired of waiting at the rendezvous and had rightly decided to proceed independently.

On returning to La Madeleine I found, in the light of day, that in the grounds of our mansion was another house, which, on investigation, turned out to be a real discovery, for every room contained a number of wooden "double bunks," evidently constructed by the R.E. unit that had previously occupied the place. The house was large enough to accommodate pretty well the whole of one rifle company, and was an ideal rest billet. Without any hesitation I unscrupulously allotted it to my own company.

We found time to snatch a hasty breakfast at a nearby café, and then about 7.30 a.m. the Battalion arrived, with

the C.O. marching at their head : of Digger, who had gone out to meet them, there was no sign whatever, and in fact I never saw him again. From this day onwards he was missing, and it soon became obvious that he must have run into the enemy. He was last seen by Pat somewhere near the Forêt de Nieppe, travelling (as Pat told him) in the wrong direction. It was not until some time after our return to England that we learned he was a prisoner.

The C.O. was obviously dog-tired, and so was the Battalion, which had marched for a good part of the night, and I was thankful to be able to show them into such a comfortable billet. Breakfast was waiting for them under the trees in the grounds of the big house, and altogether things began to look a good deal more rosy. It was pleasant to contemplate the prospect of a holiday which would last, we believed, for two days at least. Imagine the general dismay, then, when the news spread, first as a rumour and then as a definite order, that everyone was to remain ready to move off again immediately. We had not even finished breakfast, and the men had scarcely had time to do more than dump some of their equipment and indulge in the pleasures of anticipation as they saw the beds on which they hoped to spend undisturbed long hours of much-needed sleep. The pangs of disappointment were bitter and indeed hardly bearable ; and yet after the first inevitable grumbles everyone was magnificent. Breakfast was hurriedly finished ; the heavy load of equipment was buckled on once more ; and yet again the Battalion made ready to take the road. "P.B.I." !

I was sent out by Cecil to find a local inhabitant who would guide us on the road to Armentières, and after some difficulty I found one, although only by assuring him, quite untruthfully, that if he marched the first mile



or two with us we would supply him with transport to take him back. And so once again we set off for an unknown destination. The spirit of my platoon was amazing. I had expected to find them exhausted and sullen; instead, they responded nobly to my call for a song, and we marched out of La Madeleine singing and whistling all the old favourites. Then came yet another disappointment—a message from the rear that the route had been changed: we were not, after all, to go via Armentières. There was nothing for it but to turn round and go all the way back to La Madeleine. It was only about two miles—but it meant that four miles of marching had been completely in vain, and four miles to tired men is more like ten miles to fresh troops. All the singing and enforced cheerfulness had been for nothing—it was a disheartening experience, which had a pronounced effect upon the spirit of the men, although to the casual reader it may seem a trifling set-back. From that time onwards I never got another song out of my platoon.

Back in La Madeleine, we stood about in the street for an hour or more while, presumably, those in high places were deciding what to do with us. Then off on the march again, this time by a different route. I learnt from the Padre—invariably a source of plentiful, if not always accurate, information—that we were to march some way to an embussing point, and were then bound for St. Omer. But by this time we were so strongly conscious of being mere puppets that no one really bothered to ask himself where we were going or for what purpose. It is perfectly true that as one grows wearier and wearier one becomes correspondingly more and more indifferent to one's fate. In the light of this the extraordinary calm of Captain Scott's last entries in his journal is more understandable, although it remains a matter of wonder

to me how, in such circumstances, he had the energy or indeed the clearness of mind to put his thoughts on to paper.

Our route took us through Lille, where I caught a fleeting glimpse of Alan II, who had commanded No. 12 Platoon up to the time of the Belgian invasion, and had then been whisked away to Brigade as Intelligence Officer. Since that day I had come across him only once, when he told me of an amusing experience which he had had. It appeared that while our Battalion was in the Watermolen area most of the Brigade had been occupied in guard duties of one kind or another at different V.P.s. The Brigadier, growing concerned at the very small number of troops left to him, had sent Alan to Divisional Headquarters in order to ask permission for a platoon of our 2nd Battalion to be relieved of its guard duties. Alan had duly presented himself and had been ushered into a room where he had found various generals (including one whom he recognized as Lord Gort himself) busily studying an enormous map and obviously discussing big strategic moves. Alan, after shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other for five minutes or so (and having incidentally gained important information which he should certainly not have heard) was suddenly noticed by the C.-in-C. and asked what he wanted : whereupon he solemnly stated that he had "come to ask about a platoon of the 2nd Battalion — Regiment." The effect of this upon the distinguished gathering is best left to the imagination.

For some reason which I was unable to discover, our progress was full of interruptions : we would halt, go on for about twenty yards, and then halt again ; and so it went on. Few things are more exasperating—or more tiring—to troops on the march. The only advantage was that these halts afforded an opportunity of waving to



numerous beautiful damsels who leant out from upper windows of houses along the route, and these moments of light relief did something to revive our spirits. Great was the disappointment in the platoon that we were not making a longer stay. It was the first time we had seen any French girls who were anything but plain, for we had not been in any large town before, and the men (who had come to France in the confident belief that every French girl has good looks and no morals) had been bitterly disappointed.

After passing through Lille, we followed the canal bank for a while and finally halted there under the trees on the edge of the city. By now it was about lunch-time, and we were fortunate enough to find a little shack where food and drink were on sale. The men were allowed in two or three at a time, and before long everyone was feeling much better. Freddie came along at the right moment and we had some ham sandwiches and beer together, which went down extremely well.

We remained there under the trees for most of the afternoon, and then resumed the march. Eventually we arrived at the embussing point and packed ourselves into 3-ton lorries.

I remember very little of that journey. I was sitting beside the driver, and after keeping awake with difficulty for some time, because I felt I ought to, I soon dropped off into slumber. I awoke at irregular intervals, rather sheepishly, for I feared that we might have lost touch with the vehicle in front, and there was so much military traffic on the roads that it would have been quite easy to have joined up with the wrong convoy in the darkness and general confusion. Fortunately, we kept in reasonably correct order. Every now and then, when I woke, I found that we were halted in what looked like a hopeless jam of traffic ; but eventually we always got going again

somehow. There were some wonderful bombing targets for Hitler that night, if he had only known.

*May 25, Saturday*

I woke up with a start to find that we had arrived, and so, trying hastily to pretend that I had been awake all the time, I gave the order to debus. When I had rubbed the sleep out of my eyes I found that it was about 1 a.m., and we were in a village of sorts ; but immediately after debussing we moved off up the road, and it was only when we halted just outside the village that I learned from Cecil that its name was Flêtre ; and that " A " Company had gone ahead to " capture " the next village, Caestre, which the Battalion was to hold. As Caestre turned out to be unoccupied, the word " capture " was something of a misnomer : but at the time the mere mention of anything to indicate attack instead of withdrawal had an amazingly heartening effect.

Outside Caestre we halted again while Cecil and the other company commanders received their orders, which were transmitted in outline to us. The gist of them was that the Battalion was to take up a position of all-round defence at Caestre, and " B " Company was to hold the southern approaches. It was barely first light, but we took up our position as best we could, with my platoon to the right of the road, Alan's to the left, and No. 12 astride the road itself.

My own position was most unsatisfactory from every point of view. There was little natural cover, and what ditches there were were widely separated. We had no picks or shovels with which to dig, and it was therefore a matter of choosing between putting one's sections far apart in order to give them some sort of cover, or sacrificing cover in order to keep them closer together and more under control. I plumped for the first of these two



alternatives, for it seemed quite probable that we might be shelled or bombed during the day, and some sort of cover was therefore essential. All my sections had fairly good fields of fire which were well enough co-ordinated, although from the point of view of control they were much too far apart: there must have been something like 150 yards between my right and left sections, and nearly that distance to either of them from my platoon headquarters, which was located in a small rough-and-ready trench evidently designed originally by the local populace for protection against air-raids, although they never came near it. It was not by any means ideal either as an air-raid shelter or as a platoon headquarters, for it was much too wide to afford very good protection and was also extremely muddy, the ground being almost 100 per cent clay. Moreover, it smelt unpleasantly as if it might have been dug for other purposes.

We had a peaceful day, and it was evident that the Germans were not yet in our immediate vicinity. This was just as well, for the men were extremely sleepy and were just about "all in." During the afternoon I visited Company H.Q., which, after an unsuccessful attempt to take over the house originally selected—a dead corporal had greeted Cecil when he entered—had established itself in a deserted *estaminet*.

Caestre itself was not by any means deserted, and a number of shops were still open, at any rate to begin with, from which I made various purchases. There was not very much food on sale, although at first it was possible (with some difficulty) to buy a little in the way of loaves and butter. My greatest discovery was a shop which sold really excellent champagne for the modest price of 19 francs a bottle. I bore one back in triumph to platoon headquarters, and was greeted by a gleam of anticipation in the blue eyes of Sergt. Johnson. We

popped the cork that night, and the champagne put new life into us during our respective turns of duty ; albeit champagne drunk from a mess tin, and copiously mixed with rainwater (it rained hard) might not appeal to the *gourmet*.

Why we were in Caestre at all I did not know. Were we surrounded ? It seemed quite likely. I did not even know whether we were still operating as part of a higher formation or whether we were a "lost battalion," and I was too tired to care. We were evidently pawns in a game of some sort, and we were not in a position to see the chess-board.

## CHAPTER X

### A "POCKET OF RESISTANCE"

*May 26, Sunday*

THE next morning the Battalion's position of all-round defence was altered to a line facing west, and as part of this adjustment we ourselves took over the position formerly occupied by "C" Company, stretching 500 yards north from the western approaches to Caestre. My own platoon was on the company's left, astride the road, with No. 10 on our immediate right and No. 12 beyond them. We could not afford any reserve platoon as such.

Here we were, then, waiting for an attack, and facing the same way as the Siegfried Line ! It was a comic thought, but its implications were not particularly agreeable. Luckily no one had much time to think what it all meant, and the troops themselves remained in blissful ignorance of the true state of affairs. We were too close to our own job to think of anyone or anything



else ; we knew that, according to the new dispositions, " C " Company was to be on our left, and " D " Company on our right, but that was the limit of our knowledge. It was not until I returned to England that I learned that we had still been functioning as a brigade, and that our 5th Battalion were on our left. Brigade Headquarters were, I believe, at Strazeele, although no one ever told me this at the time. I was under the impression that we were an isolated unit stuck out in the blue with a view to delaying the German advance. Not that that made very much sense ; but I was beyond seeking for whys and wherefores.

I do not know for what purpose my position had originally been dug, but it could scarcely have been worse sited. True, it was something to have trenches at all ; but they were trenches which offered only an extremely limited field of fire. One of my sections found itself immediately in rear of another one, and behind both lay a third trench which was subsequently occupied by Company H.Q. On the other side of the road was a curious serpentine trench which had to harbour both my remaining section and platoon headquarters, and which afforded hardly any field of fire at all : only from the front end was it possible for two men to fire, and even here their choice of target was severely limited by the presence of a hedge running down the right of the position. It was yet another example of an elementary mistake—the belief that to defend an obstacle you must necessarily sit on the obstacle and fire outwards (thereby laying yourself open to an outflanking movement)—instead of getting on to the flanks and firing inwards. Time never seems to remove this error : one can seldom take part in an exercise, even at this stage of the war, without seeing a light machine-gun (devoid of ammunition) pointing straight

up the road, and a soldier lying behind it with a smug and virtuous look upon his face.

My platoon's position lay behind a brickworks, not the least prominent feature of which was a kiln of sorts containing, as we found on investigation, huge piles of ammunition boxes (unused) left by the R.A.F. The proximity of this dump caused Alan and myself a good deal of anxiety during the bombardments of the next two days, but fortunately it was not hit.

Soon after getting into our new position, about 11 a.m., I received orders to go out on patrol with a view to finding out if and where there were any other British troops in the vicinity, and to bring back any other information I could glean; in particular, I was to make a note of any possible landing-grounds for aircraft. Accordingly I set off on a bicycle, with two of my men, into the blue. No one had any idea where the enemy were, except that we had seen the glow of fires during the night from the direction of Hondeghem and Hazebrouck. In the circumstances the natural precaution was to send one of my men ahead as a scout; but as he did not know the way, and I had the only map, it was not easy to put theory into practice, and in fact for most of the way I cast caution to the winds and rode ahead myself. One man had to be left to follow at a respectful distance, as a "getaway man," so that he could pedal back if anything happened to us, and relate the horrid news.

After going over the level-crossing we rode on for another two miles or so until we struck a main road. Here I met a little cluster of excited villagers, who told me a very vague story of how German soldiers in lorries had been seen there only the previous day—"Oui, mon lieutenant, beaucoup de camions—soldats Allemands"! I also stopped a British army car containing a senior officer,



who informed me that Hondegghem was a "strong point."

At this road junction I turned right towards St. Sylvestre Cappel, and shortly afterwards right again, which brought us out on the main Caestre-St. Sylvestre road. Here I came across the only British troops who appeared to be in our area—a battery of the R.H.A., busily occupied in cleaning their guns at the roadside.

On returning to Caestre I submitted my report to Battalion H.Q. (now located at the *estaminet* which had formerly been our Company H.Q.) where I found the Brigadier and the C.O. of the Brigade Field Company, R.E. The latter was giving the Brigadier some elementary instruction on the subject of anti-tank mines, complete with live specimen, and there was a general atmosphere of nervousness as the Brigadier played with his new toy, accompanied by tactful reminders of the need for delicate handling. I was relieved when I found myself outside in the street again, and returned to the platoon headquarters in time for lunch.

There was no excitement during the day, and I took the opportunity of doing what little I could to improve my platoon position. The "road block" to our front was something of a euphemism, consisting as it did of nothing more than a small pile of rusty iron rails at the side of the road; and even these could not be placed in position to form a block, as the road had to be kept open for traffic. However, I found a couple of old iron trolleys belonging to the brick works, which were duly hauled up on to the road in order to make the obstacle a little more formidable. I also put my reserve section on to collecting all the wire fencing they could lay hands on, and had this set up along the front. It was only a single-strand fence, and flimsy at that, but

at any rate it was a slight obstacle, particularly against a possible night attack.

At first there was a certain amount of traffic along the road and through the "block," but after the first day and night it dwindled, and finally ceased altogether. We had a varied assortment of vehicles to deal with. There were British trucks and convoys, many of which were making for Cassel (where, I heard later, G.H.Q. was located); there were a number of French supply vehicles, which were always treated with suspicion, but which, on being searched, usually proved to contain nothing more harmful than carcasses of meat or loaves of bread; and there were various carloads of civilian refugees. There were also a few civilians on bicycles or on foot. All civilians were naturally objects of suspicion—though possibly not so much as they should have been—but there was little one could do about it. Identity cards and other documents were invariably demanded, and equally invariably forthcoming; and yet I knew perfectly well that the well-equipped Fifth Columnist would never fail for lack of an adequate pass. But obviously one could not detain everyone simply on the ground of vague suspicions. Some of those who entered Caestre were detained, and proved to be lunatics who had escaped or been released from an asylum elsewhere. One day I saw five men under guard, awaiting removal to brigade or division (if division still existed); they certainly looked villainous enough to be murderers, and, as they happened to be standing against a wall, they attracted quite a little crowd of spectators from the local populace, who confidently hoped that they were about to witness a free execution.

Company H.Q. and Platoon H.Q. were at first established in the same building—a little brick-built outhouse conveniently divided into two, and provided



with straw which made an excellent bed. But I did not care for it in spite of its comparative comfort ; principally because it was situated on the right of my platoon's position, instead of behind it. However, the previous night spent in a muddy trench in the pouring rain had not been an agreeable experience, and I therefore gave way to the desire for a roof over my head. As usual, Sergt. Johnson and I divided the night up into two "watches"; I took the period up to 1 a.m., after which he was on duty till dawn. On this particular night I had some difficulty in rousing him when the time came for him to relieve me, and for fully five minutes he continued to be more than half asleep and talked the most arrant nonsense.

*May 27, Monday*

The next morning I put practical considerations before comfort, and moved my headquarters to the trench beside the road. Virtue was later rewarded, for during the afternoon a mortar bomb came through the roof of the little building we had vacated, and when I examined the ruins I found a sinister metal noscap lying on the very spot where I had slept the previous night !

In the course of the morning we learnt that some kind of advance was contemplated, and eventually orders reached us that we were to advance with "D" Company up the road to the north-west as far as St. Sylvestre Cappel, with the object of finding out whether or not it was occupied by the enemy. Although I suspect that in reality little more than a glorified fighting patrol was intended, the general effect on morale was most noticeable. It was the first time that the word "advance" had been mentioned, and it made a refresh-

ing contrast to the seemingly endless withdrawals that we had so far experienced.

But this projected advance was forestalled by evident signs of an attack upon our position at Caestre. It began with the somewhat hasty return of Pat and a section of his carriers, who had been out to patrol up to the cross-roads two miles or so to our front (where I had been the previous morning). On reaching the cross-roads the carriers had been fired at from a nearby house, and had had to beat a hasty retreat—though not before one of Pat's men had been shot in the neck.

As the morning wore on Verey lights appeared to our front with increasing frequency, accompanied by a fairly persistent bombardment of our positions. In spite of this an excellent hot dinner came up miraculously soon after midday. After dinner came more Verey lights, this time closer than before, although, as at Anseghem, without any sign of the enemy himself.

In the middle of the afternoon there was something of a stir on our left front, followed almost immediately by an excited shout from Cecil of "Tanks! Back into the houses!" After a moment or two of confusion I collected my platoon into the houses at the corner, and in next to no time we had taken over a room on the first floor, excellently sited for firing down both roads, with a Bren gun and an anti-tank rifle mounted on tables ready to fire in either direction. I had to smash all the glass in the windows quite ruthlessly, but it was no time for finer feelings. We also had men at the windows ready to throw hand grenades out if they got anything of a target. Not that I had the least idea what the sudden "flap" was all about, and to this day I am not much wiser: except that it turned out afterwards that a patrol sent out by "C" Company, under John, had returned somewhat hastily through our position, and it may be



that they had seen some tanks and raised an alarm which reached us in an exaggerated form. However that may be, after twenty minutes or so the excitement subsided and we came forth again rather sheepishly—not before I had seen the unpleasant sight of a shell-shocked sergeant on the pavement below, quivering convulsively at each successive explosion. For during all this time we were being bombarded constantly and accurately with mortar fire.

On emerging from the house I collected my platoon—including one or two chicken-hearted creatures, who had retired hastily to the cover of a nearby garage, where they had been solacing their shattered nerves with cigarettes—and we reoccupied our makeshift positions along the side of the road. The bombardment continued, but nothing else of importance occurred.

I took no chances, however, and posted three men in the first-floor room which we had just left, with the object of engaging with hand-grenades any tanks that might rush our defences. As this particular house was at the corner which seemed to have been attracting the enemy's fire all day, it wasn't altogether a healthy spot, and I experienced a feeling of intense self-reproach when shortly afterwards I looked round to see half the house in ruins. As the dust of the explosion cleared away I went back to inquire into their fate, and I feared the worst: but I discovered soon enough that they had yielded to the frailty of human nature and had effected a tactical withdrawal to the cellar, whence they emerged at my call, and with an expression of mingled shame and relief upon their faces.

It must have been at about five o'clock in the afternoon that I received orders to pick a fighting patrol of ten men and report to Battalion H.Q. forthwith. On arrival I found the C.O. standing in the middle of the street,

with a positive hail of explosives coming down all round us. Don and I, in common with others standing by, made no secret of our distaste for this sort of thing, and crouched down unashamedly by the side of the road at the whistle of every approaching missile ; but the C.O. merely stood there with his hands in his pockets laughing at us, for all the world as if he was in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. Brave ? Most certainly yes—if to be ignorant of fear can be termed bravery. Our Brigade Commander was exactly the same.

The C.O. told me that he wanted me to take my patrol out to the south and deal with some enemy who were believed to be in a farm about three-quarters of a mile up the road. I was to go out to the left of the road, "in order to avoid this stuff that's coming over at present," and if there were no enemy in the farm I was to push on towards a blazing windmill on the other side of the road and so return, with a report of anything seen, more particularly in the way of tanks. Don was to come with me. I didn't altogether relish the job on hand, but when the C.O. wished me luck I managed to grin rather feebly, and we set off.

We had an early setback, for we had gone only about two hundred yards when we spotted a number of men in uniform moving up a hedge some way to our left, and it was some minutes before we decided that they were British and not German. To our left front, too, we saw a blazing vehicle which at first we took to be a tank, but which proved to be a British lorry. Then we pushed on again, with a couple of scouts ahead to give us warning in case we bumped into the enemy ; and my hand grasped my revolver a little nervously, since I fully expected to run into the Huns at any moment. Ten men and a Bren gun didn't seem an excessive force for dealing with them if we encountered them at close



quarters. However, we reached the farm without incident and found no one in occupation.

Accordingly I decided to carry straight on with the second part of my task ; but we were just crossing the road when—for the second time that day—I heard a shout of "Tanks !" This time there was not much doubt about it ; for simultaneously with the warning came an ominous and unmistakable rumble close at hand on our right. Never did ten men (and one officer) surmount a seemingly impenetrable hedge with greater speed : for we had no anti-tank rifles and it was without question a time for discretion rather than valour. In a matter of seconds eleven distinctly bewildered human beings were lying scratched and breathless behind the hedge and listening to the sound of German tanks blazing away, barely a hundred yards from us, at the village we had so recently left. My first reaction, I remember, was to wonder what on earth would become of my little party if the Jerries occupied Caestre in our absence and we were left isolated in a hostile world. But the more pressing question was what best to do in the circumstances. From the noise of their tracks it was clear that there were a number of tanks to be dealt with, and I didn't see how, with a single Bren and only a couple of Mills grenades, we could do much about them. I therefore decided to push on and try to reach some viewpoint where I could see more clearly what was happening, after which it might be easier to know what to do.

We crept forward stealthily along the hedges till we reached the main road again, and found it clear of the enemy. By this time the noise of the tanks' machine guns had ceased, and in the heat of the afternoon all was quiet, except for an occasional Army lorry rumbling past us to or from Caestre a mile or two away. I found a little house on the right of the road and explained to

the aged owner that I wanted to have a look out of his top window. He conducted me up to a granary in the roof, whence I obtained a good bird's-eye view of the landscape and was able to pinpoint my position on the map. Observation was restricted, however, by a slight heat-haze which covered all beyond the middle distance. I could see, though, that there were no infantry following up the German tanks, so that here (as on many other occasions, I suspect) the enemy were relying purely on the moral effect of tanks to crumple up the resistance in front of them, no doubt hoping that the defenders would imagine the tanks to be forerunners of hordes of infantry. I was glad to be able to "debunk" this particular bogey.

Through my field-glasses I could see what appeared to be a couple of tanks lying up in the distance behind a wood, and by taking compass bearings I was able to plot their position pretty accurately. I immediately sent a message to Battalion Headquarters reporting this and also giving the approximate map reference of the tanks that we had passed, with a request for an anti-tank gun or anti-tank rifle to be sent out to deal with them: after which I decided to return in hopes of keeping the tanks under observation (and perhaps catch the crew unawares if they dismounted) until the arrival of the anti-tank weapon for which I had asked.

Not wanting ten clumsy soldiers crashing through hedges and giving the whole show away, I picked one man—Pte. "Spud," my "Bolshie" Irishman—and with our two hand grenades we set off across the fields on our voyage of discovery. The rest of the patrol had orders to lie up in the corner of a field on the other side of the road, and there to await our return.

We hadn't gone more than a couple of hundred yards when we had the thrill of seeing one of the German



tanks just the other side of the hedge only a stone's throw away. There was no sound or sign of movement, and I presumed that the crew must be lying up inside in preparation for another move forward. Summoning what little courage I possessed, I crept forward stealthily on my own until I was actually behind the hedge with the tank barely ten yards from me on the other side of it. My forefinger was crooked somewhat nervously through the ring of a hand grenade (I had never thrown a live grenade in my life, and was extremely doubtful as to the result if I did <sup>1</sup>), and my heart was thumping away like a sledgehammer as I waited for some sign of human movement which would give me my chance. But nothing happened. The sun beat down: the drowsy minutes wore on; and still I gazed in vain at the sinister grey shape beyond the hedge. I even coughed loudly once or twice in the hope of attracting the attention of its occupants. No good—it was silent as the grave. Silent as the grave! And then it dawned on me in a flash that this was no terrifying monster which might at any moment turn and spit fire at me: it was knocked out, harmless, dead as mutton. Almost simultaneously I became conscious of other tanks visible on the landscape, some half hidden by hedges, and one lying in the open about three hundred yards away. I counted—one, two, three, four, five, six of them altogether: and all were silent. I could see moving figures beside the farthest tank, so I fired a couple of shots from my rifle (borrowed for the occasion) and prayed that I had aimed well and truly. But I regretted it almost at once, for I suddenly caught the flutter of a white handkerchief and realized that these Germans at any rate had had enough of the war.

<sup>1</sup> There had been no grenades available for training before we left England.

Here was a somewhat embarrassing situation, with half a dozen Huns advancing towards us with their hands well above their heads in token of surrender ; and I was not sorry that this coincided with the arrival on the scene of a Sergeant-Major and one or two others from the Brigade anti-tank company, who had been sent out to see how effectively or otherwise the tanks had been knocked out. Between us we dealt with the German prisoners, who were in a sorry state, with a number of nasty wounds : they were a miserable selection of men from the physical point of view, and in their tank overalls looked for all the world like a lot of stunted and undernourished coal-heavers. But, bitterly though I hated all Germans, I could not help feeling sorry for these wretches. One man in particular, who had a severe head wound, was pretty far gone, and the quality of mercy still remained sufficiently in me to give him a drink of water from my water-bottle—a gesture which I afterwards regretted, for the bottle tasted of blood for days afterwards.

I heartily wished that I knew some German, so that I could tell these miserable specimens what I thought of them and their Führer. As it was, I had to be content with muttering "*Blitzkrieg*" to them savagely, hoping that they would deduce from my tone of voice what I felt about it. Evidently I did not succeed, however, for they merely replied "*Ja, Blitzkrieg*" in the most matter-of-fact way, which infuriated me still further. Altogether a comic episode, as I now realize.

While we were dealing with the prisoners and trying to do something for their wounds, a number of biplanes flew down low over our heads. They were not unlike Gloucester "Gladiators" to my untutored eye,<sup>1</sup> but we knew only too well that no plane in that sky could ever

<sup>1</sup> They were probably Henschel 123's.



be friendly, and we fully expected to be machine-gunned for our pains. However, they sheered off as if satisfied.

I thought it was high time that I collected my patrol and returned home, for I had been out a long time and there didn't seem much more that I could profitably do. Accordingly I turned the prisoners over to the anti-tank Sergeant-Major and his satellites, whose rightful captives they were, and went back to pick up my trusty band from where I had left them : but not before I had seen a very dead German captain lying at the bottom of the tank that I had watched so carefully, and collected from the outside of the tank two bulging haversacks which turned out to be full of Gillette razor-blades, soap (shaving and ordinary), and bottles of scent—all no doubt looted from canteens and shops in the course of the triumphant German advance. I was glad to feel that we had regained these spoils, particularly as razor-blades and soap were growing increasingly scarce in my platoon. I used those blades for months afterwards.

And so we headed cross-country for Caestre once more, passing on the way several of the other German tanks, all of which bore unmistakable signs of the hammering they had received from our anti-tank weapons, whose shooting had obviously been deadly. This German attack, at least, had proved a costly failure. We collected a few swastika flags as souvenirs from the turrets of the tanks and made our way back without further incident, apart from some confused shouting behind us as our friends the Sergeant-Major and company rounded up one or two more Jerries who had been lurking hidden in the bushes, and whom we in our innocence had failed to notice. Our route back took us past a farm whose outbuildings were burning fiercely, and whose inhabitants showed in no uncertain fashion their delight at the vengeance that had overtaken the Boche for wrecking their homes.

We returned through "C" Company's position, hoping that in the excitement of the moment they would not open fire on us, and so back on to the main road to report once again at Battalion H.Q. Our swastikas gave us the appearance of a triumphal procession, though in all conscience I have to admit that we had done precious little to justify our mission. However, we had certainly had some excitement, and it was something of an anticlimax to return to my platoon position and to comparatively normal routine. We had long since been given up as lost and received a cheery welcome, especially when the nature of our booty was revealed. So ended that little episode. The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and when night came we did not allow the apparent nearness of the enemy to disturb our slumber unduly.

*May 28, Tuesday*

In the morning the bombardment of our positions by shell and/or mortar fire, which had ceased during the hours of darkness, was resumed, and continued fiercely all day with only occasional lulls. By this time the church spire behind was looking extremely sorry for itself, and before the end of the day it was little more than a mass of rubble. It is hard to believe that mortar fire alone could have wrought such havoc.

In spite of the bombardment we remained miraculously unscathed, my only casualty at Caestre to date being Pte. Cook, one of the reinforcements that had recently joined us, who had had the bad luck to be hit by a fragment while out on standing patrol in front of our position in the early hours of the previous night. It seemed to be only a slight wound, and he was successfully evacuated; but I read in the casualty lists a few weeks later that he had died of wounds. These reinforcements seemed to be particularly unlucky, for on this very day a private



in Alan's platoon stopped a direct hit and there was very little left of him, poor wretch.

The day wore on without any important incident, though there were reports of German tanks having been seen on our flanks, and I had an uncomfortable feeling that the enemy was adopting his usual tactics and bypassing the little "pocket of resistance" that our efforts had provided. It was distinctly unpleasant to realize that with every minute our encirclement was probably becoming more complete. Verrey lights to our right and left confirmed my impression.

Dinners, however, came up to us as usual, which seemed to indicate that the road to Flêtre in our rear was still open (for that was where our "B" Echelon transport was located—or so I believed), and an additional proof that we were not yet altogether severed from the outside world was given by the welcome arrival of a big lorry *en route* through Caestre for an unknown destination. The occupants of this lorry showered gifts upon us, consisting of everything from packets of cigarettes to bottles of wine. I can still hear Cecil's voice shouting at me through cupped hands across the road from Company H.Q., in the short interval between one explosion and another, "Peter, would you like a bottle of Dubonnet?" Would I?—hell!—as the Americans would say: I certainly would, and over it came. It added greatly to the afternoon's festivities, and helped to make up in Dutch courage whatever we may have lacked in British. Whether by accident or design, Alan arrived to visit me almost immediately afterwards, and in our moments of ducking as we heard the sinister whistle of an approaching missile, we vulgarly "swigged" at the bottle and chanted happily that little ditty—

"I don't want to be a soldier:  
I don't want to go to war"

etc., which raised our spirits very considerably. "*Vin tonique?*" I should say so. Do not censure us too mercilessly, gentle reader: we certainly needed something to cheer us up.

## CHAPTER XI

### MONT DES CATS

NIGHTFALL once again, and still no attack. None of us knew exactly what was happening or had happened to the B.E.F. in general, but we had a pretty shrewd idea that things were far from well. The blazing of fires near and far all round us illuminated the night sky and told us only too clearly of the conflict that was raging—a conflict of which we were only an infinitesimal part. That very afternoon, as we waited in our weapon pits for the attack that never came, a mass of German planes had flown over us—a mixed formation of sixty-four fighters and bombers (I counted them myself) which we devoutly prayed were not intended for our benefit. They circled round us at a considerable height and then made off again in an easterly direction. Yes, something was "in the air" with a vengeance: but our news was hopelessly scanty and none of us knew what was happening. The last thing I had heard, as a rumour from a passing lorry—or was it from Cecil, who suddenly bethought himself of Francis's portable wireless, still lying untouched in the P.U.?—was that Calais was still holding out, and that Dunkirk remained in our hands. I thanked Heaven for that, at any rate; and it did not require much foresight to predict that in Dunkirk lay our only remaining hope. But would the



B.E.F. be withdrawn in time? And, even if orders for withdrawal came through, what sort of chance had we of reaching the coast before the enemy closed in around us? We were forty miles or so away, and I did not feel particularly optimistic.

*May 29, Wednesday*

Soon after midnight I received the news from Cecil—brief, hurried, half foreseen yet wholly incredible: the Belgians had thrown in their hand and orders had been issued for the immediate withdrawal of the B.E.F. We were to start at one o'clock on the long journey to Dunkirk. It is impossible to describe my feelings—a jumbled mixture of relief, disappointment, and, perhaps greatest of all, an uneasy foreboding (which weighed the more heavily because I could not share it with others) that we were about to take part in one of the greatest military disasters that the world had ever known.

But there was little time for such reflections: orders had to be given out to my section commanders, great-coats and other kit had to be folded and loaded on the platoon truck, and all this in the hampering confusion of darkness and excitement. Moreover, everything had to be done in complete silence in order not to betray to the enemy that we were slipping from his clutches.

Somehow we managed to be ready in time; but almost at the last minute Cecil sent me off across country to hurry up No. 12 Platoon under Sergt. Carr and to make sure that they were not left behind. I stumbled blindly over tussocks of grass, became entangled with barbed-wire fences—only to discover that I was alone in an eerie and unfamiliar countryside: No. 12 Platoon had already gone, and needed no special promptings from me. It began to look as if I should be the one to be left behind, but I hurried back just in time to find the column moving

off, and miraculously hit the road at the very point where my own platoon were going by.

It was a weird business, that muffled crunch of marching feet on the sides of the road, with the low purring of the platoon trucks following behind. How far should we get before we were discovered? In spite of all our efforts the noise of our going seemed terrific in the darkness, and the frequent appearance of Verey lights and parachute flares on either side of the road increased our difficulties. Was it my imagination, or were those Verey lights really closing in on to the road? It seemed that, if the gods were with us, we were running out of the noose at the very moment it was being drawn about our necks.

So we plodded along till we came to Flêtre, where we had debussed on our arrival three or four days before. Once again it was dark and still, and as we passed through I caught a glimpse of the Brigade Staff Captain standing at the corner. Twelve hours later he was a prisoner.

Then followed some nasty moments when the column came to a sudden halt about a mile beyond Flêtre; and when I went up to the head of the column I found a bewildered little group of officers, including the I.O., poring over a map in the dim light of a screened torch. We were lost—at this of all moments, when every second counted and the dawn was almost upon us. Frantic knockings on the door of a nearby farm brought no response, and it must have been nearly ten minutes before we were all agreed that we had turned to the left too soon, and we hit the trail once more, to arrive back on our correct route just as other parts of the Battalion were going by. It took another three or four minutes to sort out the resultant confusion of men and vehicles, but after what seemed an age of suspense we were once again heading for home.



The glimmerings of first light found us in a little village known as Mont des Cats, which has been well described as "a little pimple on which all the vehicles in the B.E.F. seemed to have been piled." It certainly was an incredible sight. As we arrived from one direction we ran straight into another convoy travelling the other way; and this unexpected meeting, added to all the existing transport standing along the side (or even in the middle) of the road, caused an indescribable scene of confusion. And with every minute that passed the dreaded daylight stole relentlessly upon us. Trim little staff officers who sit comfortably at desks, poring over elaborate movement tables and working out beautiful convoy schemes on a basis of thirty vehicles to a mile, would have perished from apoplexy had they seen the roads at Mont des Cats on that historic morning.

At first it seemed that we were halting only until the road congestion had been sorted out, but we were speedily disillusioned. Here comes Cecil with orders for the platoon commanders—"The Battalion is taking up a defensive position to cover the withdrawal—'B' Company will hold this area here—etc."—and he indicated our platoon positions. My own area was to be in and around a little wood on the forward slope, with Alan's platoon on my left and No. 12 on the right.

This looked like being the end of the B.E.F. as far as we were concerned; for one could hardly believe that any who lingered now had much hope of reaching the coast without being cut off. However, there was nothing for it but to get down to the job, and so once again we found ourselves taking up a defensive position, while on the road behind us the vehicles continued to pile up in unutterable confusion.

The area allotted to my platoon could scarcely be called ideal. To begin with, a small wood on a forward

slope in full view of the enemy was bound to attract his fire and was likely to prove a most unhealthy spot ; and, apart from this, there were no natural ditches, and the possible section positions, such as they were, were largely exposed and offered only very poor fields of fire. True, there were some crude, shallow trenches inside the wood itself, and even a line of rusty barbed wire ; but the siting of these was of no tactical value, and indeed I had the impression that they were defences dating from the last war. Certainly that particular slope had had its share of attention twenty-five years earlier, as was evident from the numerous old shell craters that were still clearly visible. At first I established my platoon headquarters in one of these craters, but soon afterwards moved it to a more forward position from which I could obtain better observation—fortunately, because only a little time later a shell landed in precisely the same spot as its predecessor of the last war.

This bombardment of our position, which was carried out by what I suspect to have been infantry guns and mortars, began fairly soon after our arrival (about 3 a.m.) and continued throughout the morning. It was a most unpleasant experience, for we had no means of retaliation : true, there were, to begin with, a few British guns on the road behind us, but these were speedily knocked out or else ran out of ammunition. What was particularly exasperating was that we could clearly see the flash of one gun each time it fired at us ; it was only about a mile and a half away, and if we had only had the means to do so we could have dealt with it quite easily. As it was, we had to lie there and take our punishment, and every time we saw the flash from the corner of the field we would count—"one, two, three four—here she comes, boys—whistle—CRA-A-ASH !" ;



and every time it seemed that the shell would burst in our midst.

My left section, lying along the edge of a field, were the first to catch it. A shell appeared to land right among them, and in the cloud of dust that followed the explosion I caught a glimpse of a body which rolled sickeningly forward over a bank and disappeared. "Poor old L/Cpl. Biggs has copped it," I was told by one of his section—"blown to pieces, sir—just blown to pieces!" This news distressed me, for I knew Biggs to be a married man devoted to his wife and baby, and it seemed rotten luck that he should have gone out that way. Imagine my amazement, then, when I reached the coast, to find the lamented Lance-Corporal alive and seemingly in excellent spirits. Exactly what had happened to him I do not know to this day; but I suspect that the bursting of the shell almost on top of him was too much for his nerves and he may have temporarily lost his memory.

The morning wore on, and the bombardment continued unabated. I think the strain told on us all pretty severely, for it did not seem that we were achieving much by lying there as targets for the Boche, since we never saw anything of his infantry to shoot at, and, even if we had, our position was not strong enough to withstand any kind of assault, so that I felt we weren't really much of a rearguard. Still, there was no sign of any order for withdrawal, so we just had to stay there and hope for the best.

Any sort of movement in the wood (which was not thick enough to screen us from observation) brought an immediate intensification of the enemy's shelling. One of these unpleasant periods occurred while I was moving my left-hand section to a new position where they would be somewhat less exposed; an ominous whistle sent us

face downwards on the ground and as we hurled ourselves down a shell seemed to burst right among us. We were all a little stunned, but I picked myself up and found that I was intact, although there were some frightful moans coming from Pte. "Spud," who had a nasty wound in the leg and was losing a good deal of blood; while Pte. Moore had a clean wound like a bullet-hole in the top of his thigh. We did what we could with field dressings, after which I organized a carrying-party to take them back to the little road running down the side of our wood, with a view to getting them from there to the R.A.P. The company stretcher-bearers (who had brightly left their stretchers on the transport) had long since vanished.

Then came the dive-bombers. Lured to the scene by the aspect of such a helpless mass of men and transport, they circled overhead like kites hovering above a dying beast, then swooped one by one. Their principal target appeared to be the congested road behind me, and they came so close and so low that I could quite clearly see the bombs falling in "sticks" of five at the very moment of release. Alas, we had lost our tripods in that night of confusion when we left Anseghem, and could therefore put up no effective A.A. resistance (firing the Bren from the shoulder or the hip had not in those days been thought of), but the range was so absurdly short (barely two or three hundred yards) that I grabbed a rifle and solemnly sat there blazing away with it from under a tree—a chance in a million, admittedly, but it was a good deal better for one's morale than simply cowering in a trench doing nothing. I did at least feel that I was taking some sort of counter-offensive action, and even though the odds against registering a hit were so overwhelming, I nevertheless persuaded myself that every shot was going home, and optimistically



imagined that, each time I fired, I could see the plane quiver as if about to crash.

The dive-bombing (plus what sounded like a certain amount of random machine-gunning) went on for about a quarter of an hour, after which the planes sheered off and we were left once more to the attentions of the enemy artillery. Still we saw that flash in the half distance, from the corner of a field in the direction of Godewaerswelde, and still there followed the inevitable whistle and crash and cloud of dust—sometimes into the wood itself, bringing down great branches on top of us with a hideous rending noise, or else landing farther behind, in and around the monastery on the top of the hill, or away over on the other side of the crest.

In the circumstances it was not surprising that some of my men were by now pretty badly demoralized. After all, they had trudged something over 200 miles since arriving in France a few weeks before: tired as they were, they had had to stand a succession of bombardments of all kinds without ever having a chance to reply: and now, with all hope of escape seemingly vanishing, they had passively to endure further punishment. Moreover, beyond the odd tins of reserve food which each man still carried on him, they had eaten nothing since the previous day—although curiously enough, among all the impressions which I retain of that amazing morning, I myself have no memory of hunger. There were too many other distractions.

Not unnaturally, I find it hard to recall the exact sequence of events. I remember moments when my own nerves were very close to breaking-point—when I looked across to Alan's position on my left, and, seeing no sign of life, believed that his platoon had been wiped out in some mysterious fashion, whereas in reality they had suffered only a few casualties. "Mr. R——!"

I shouted from the edge of the wood during a brief lull in the firing, "Mr. R——!" But my words went echoing across the slope in the heat of that sunny morning, and no answer came back. And I remember being steadied by the sight of the C.O., imperturbable as ever, discussing the situation with Cecil—and, again, a fleeting glimpse of the Brigadier, who appeared through a hedge on to the road three hundred yards or so away, at a time when the bombardment was at its height, without a trace of flinching. At such moments I knew that these were brave men.

About ten o'clock came a message from Cecil—all platoon commanders to report forthwith. A hazardous run along a two-hundred-yard stretch of open road to our front, and I found him ensconced in the middle of a bush, poring over a map and desperately trying to locate our exact position—which I personally did not succeed in discovering until I looked at my map again and thought it out after returning to England!

The Battalion was to withdraw at about eleven o'clock, and there were rough instructions as to the order of companies past the starting-point, which might have been of more value if only the French maps had made it possible for us to agree as to what that starting-point was. However, we grasped the main gist of the order, which was that we were to make for Poperinghe, lie up there for a few hours, and then go on to Dunkirk. All transport was to be left behind—"and that, I'm afraid, means leaving the wounded."

Another mad dash along the open stretch of road, and I rejoined my platoon in the wood. There was not much time to lose, and the situation was not made any easier by another unlucky shell which crashed into the wood and laid out some more of my men. Among them was Pte. Boxall, who had shown himself throughout



recent weeks to be one of the gamest men in the platoon, in spite of his youth (he was only about 20). He caught it pretty badly in the leg and in the hand, yet lay there fully conscious but uncomplaining until we were able to get him back to the road. Others who were hit included my excellent Sergt. Johnson, though fortunately he suffered only a slight grazing of the hands. One man appeared to be so obviously dead that it seemed useless to waste any of the few remaining precious minutes in attending to him : it was not easy to recognize him at first, but it turned out to be Pte. Webster, a nice quiet lad. On returning to England all available witnesses agreed in reporting him as killed in action ; and yet some months later he was unbelievably reported to be wounded and a prisoner of war. I have blamed myself ever since for having left him there, although at the time I was so convinced that he was dead that there seemed nothing else to be done.

Not that I had any intention of obeying the order that all the wounded were to be abandoned : that seemed altogether inhuman, and I determined to do my damndest to get them away. Some had already been carried back to the R.A.P., and for them there was nothing more one could do. But there was quite a little collection by the side of the wood whom it had not yet been possible to get back—"Spud," Moore, and two or three others. By a stroke of good luck I found a driver from the Royal West Kents who had become separated from his unit and whose truck was still intact ; so we hoisted our wounded aboard as carefully as we could, and I arranged with him that he should at any rate make an effort to reach Dunkirk with them. I have not to this day heard the sequel, and would dearly like to know what happened to that little party.

At length the appointed time arrived and I gathered

my platoon at the edge of the wood, not by any means reluctant to leave that unhappy place. For eight hours we had remained there to provide an easy target for the German artillery, and I don't think that any of us considered that it was too early to be going ! How far we should go before we ran into the enemy I did not know and preferred not to think : the main thing was to make for Poperinghe as speedily as possible. So down the edge of the wood we went, distinctly uncertain as to the correct route, but judging our direction from the sun until we could establish our position on the map more definitely with the aid of some prominent landmark. It was a very thin and straggly column that left Mont des Cats that morning, and at first we could not even find the rest of the company (except for No. 12 Platoon under Sergt. Carr), let alone the Battalion. However, after marching for a quarter of an hour or so we found Cecil and some more of the company, although Alan and No. 10 Platoon were still nowhere to be seen.

## CHAPTER XII

### THALASSA ! THALASSA !

WE had originally intended to make for Poperinghe via a village called Boeschepe, but when we found ourselves uncertain as to which road we were on, and spotted the spires of Poperinghe in the distance, eight miles away, we decided to travel cross-country. It was not long before we were congratulating ourselves on this decision, for we could see the roads a short distance ahead being mercilessly dive-bombed, while we ourselves moved in a long, thin line beneath the cover of trees, and so escaped detection.



After an hour or so we had a brief halt, and I had time to look round and take stock of the situation. There had been no time for any roll call before we left Mont des Cats ; I had simply collected what remained of my platoon from the wood and we had moved straight off. Now, however, I found one familiar face unaccountably missing—of Johns, my excellent batman, whom I had last seen only a short while before our withdrawal, lying in a trench in the wood with his head well down, there was not a sign. Inquiries threw no light on the mystery. Several people had seen him just before we left, and all agreed that he had not been hit—yet now he was nowhere to be found. I could not understand it at all, and the only possible explanation seemed to be that he must have fallen asleep in the trench through sheer exhaustion, and been left behind. Yet even that explanation hardly seemed possible, for there had been others with him, who would surely have seen him and roused him before we left. To-day I am still as mystified as ever, for there has been nothing from any source to throw any light on his fate. I have scanned lists of killed, wounded, and prisoners of war—in vain : his disappearance remains completely unaccountable. I have heard only one circumstantial story that he was seen four miles from Dunkirk, and another, never confirmed, that he was seen on board a ship at Dunkirk. If this latter report is true, then it is possible that he was among the unlucky ones whose ships were sunk, though it still does not explain his disappearance from Mont des Cats. I prefer to believe that one day he will turn up again, and in the meantime I continue to reproach myself for having returned home without the one man who did so much for my comfort during those ghastly weeks.

We could not afford to rest for long, and within a few minutes we were on our way once more. Very soon

we came up against a formidable and unforeseen obstacle—the frontier between France and Belgium, along which ran an unbroken line of barbed wire anything from ten to twenty yards in thickness. We looked vainly for a gap ; then the situation was saved by Sergt. Carr, who produced a pair of wire cutters and proceeded to cut a way through the frontier. Twice we came upon this obstacle—I suppose we must have cut across some kind of salient—and twice we ruthlessly hacked our way through, till the late M. Maginot must have been fairly writhing in his grave. At one point we came on a number of deserted guns staring blankly at the frontier with a menace that had lost all meaning—an ironic symbol of a turned flank, a shattered system of defence, and a nation on its death-bed.

Of the enemy there was not a sign : the green countryside across which we plodded was completely deserted and almost uncannily silent. We made one half-hearted attempt to organize our party into two platoons, in case of a sudden threat : but we were such a motley crew that after a short time we were content to overlook tactical considerations, and concentrated simply on reaching our objective as rapidly as possible. So our cross-country ramble proceeded uneventfully, apart from a few occasions when we crouched beneath the shadow of trees and hedges in order to escape detection by German aircraft flying low overhead. There was, too, one humorous moment when, as we passed along the side of a farmyard, a horse gave us the fright of our lives by suddenly peering out of a stable door and nearly biting our heads off !

On reaching Poperinghe we crossed the railway, but found no sign of the Battalion in the place appointed for the rendezvous. The only person we encountered was the M.O. of our 5th Battalion, who told us that as far as he knew the road to Dunkirk was still clear, and strongly



advised us to push on straight away while it was still possible to get through. We suggested that he should join us, but he refused, saying that he had a number of wounded to attend to in Poperinghe ; and he would not consider the possibility of leaving them. His mind was obviously made up, and it was useless to attempt to dissuade him ; but as we left him there on the railway it was as though we were looking back on the captain standing on the bridge of a sinking ship. I take my hat off to that doctor, though I have never discovered his name.

In Poperinghe we took to the road, although I personally had grave misgivings about doing so : but there was no denying that travelling cross-country was a slow process, and it was important that we should move as swiftly as possible.

As we passed through the town we could see ample evidence of the bombardment which it had suffered. Demolished houses and piles of rubble were everywhere, and in one place we saw a terrific crater caused by an exceptionally heavy bomb. I was extremely glad that we had not passed through during the morning, when, I gathered, the town had had a particularly severe pounding.

Up the main street we went, and a turn to the left brought us on to the Dunkirk road. I began to feel more hopeful, though it was clear that we were not by any means out of the wood yet. My chief concern was for the provisioning of our little party : for although most of us still carried a few spare tins of food, I knew that if and when we reached the coast we could expect no sort of arrangements for food supply—the situation would be far too chaotic for that. Accordingly I encouraged everybody to pick up anything and everything they could *en route*, so as to have some sort of reserve on which to draw ; and sure enough we were very glad of

it later. There were all sorts of abandoned vehicles along the road, most of which yielded the odd tin or two ; and during our cross-country journey to Poperinghe I actually picked up a tin of condensed milk lying unaccountably abandoned beside a little stream. This condensed milk proved most refreshing when vulgarly sucked through a hole in the lid—a practice which (in spite of parental discouragement) I had always secretly enjoyed in my childhood.

About three miles out of Poperinghe we had a stroke of luck and spotted an abandoned water truck standing in a field beside the road, and we could not resist a short halt to take advantage of such a godsend. It was a great chance to fill up our water-bottles, for there was no knowing when we should next have a chance to do so ; and even though my own water-bottle was still tainted with the blood of the German who had drunk from it, it was better than nothing.

While we were standing round the water-cart we spotted the Brigade Major coming along the road. He gave us the surprising news that the rest of the Battalion were behind us, and would be coming up shortly—surprising, because I had assumed that our journey cross-country to Poperinghe had put us well behind, and when we found the lying-up area deserted it seemed clear that the Battalion must have gone on ahead of us. However, we decided to wait, and sure enough after a few minutes along came the rest of the Brigade, or at any rate two battalions of it, and there, yes, there was old Alan and No. 10 Platoon, grinning away for all they were worth, and as pleased to see us as we were to see them. Great were the shouts of welcome as we took our place in the column, and I began to feel that once again we were something like a fighting unit, even if it was a distinctly weary one.



But about one thing I felt vaguely and increasingly uneasy. In our small band we had succeeded in avoiding enemy observation, and we had every intention of giving a wide berth to villages and cross-roads that were likely to offer good targets for enemy bombing or shelling. Now, however, it was evident that it would be very much harder to go undetected, for we were part of a long column which intended to stick to the main road regardless of the perils involved. I did not like the idea of this at all ; and I liked it even less when I saw that we were approaching a town which was obviously under heavy enemy fire. As we came nearer and nearer I regretted more and more that we had rejoined the column : had we still been on our own we could have skirted the town by moving cross-country, and rejoined the main road later, but for a large column that was not practicable—or so its leaders evidently believed. And so we went on unswervingly, and with each step my own forebodings grew more powerful, and I cursed the folly of it all. I should, of course, have set my teeth in the approved Gary Cooper style, and betrayed no sign of my misgivings ; but my nerves were beyond heroics and I remember telling Cecil my views in no uncertain manner—not that it was his fault, poor fellow.

And so into the town, Rousbrugge-Haringhe by name, and sure enough we were under fire immediately. I half expected that we should hurry through as quickly as possible, and chance our luck, but the Brigadier's order was that the Brigade should lie up in the fields just outside. It was then about half-past five, and his intention was evidently to wait until dusk before resuming the march. Immediately we entered the town there was an abrupt halt and we received word to disperse under cover ; but I found a little later that this was a false alarm, and, on crossing the canal bridge to the correct

dispersal area in the fields on the right of the road, I found myself, with about half "B" Company, once more separated from the rest of the Battalion. For a time there was nothing we could do about it, since heavy shelling pinned us to the ground, and on the only occasion when I tried to get my chaps moving with a view to making contact with the Battalion, the attempt was greeted by an intensification of the bombardment and an infuriated bellow from the Brigadier that no one was to move. Evidently we were under observation from the enemy and from the Brigadier alike.

At last there was a lull in the bombardment and I mustered sufficient courage to go back and ask the Brigadier (who was at the best of times a distinctly peppery soldier) where I should find the remainder of the Battalion. He pointed out the area to me, and I went over on my own to try to find them, bearing a message from the Brigadier to the effect that the Brigade would resume the march at such and such a time, with the 5th Battalion in front and the 4th Battalion in the rear. What had happened to the 2nd Battalion I did not then pause to consider ; and, in fact, I do not know to this day.

On reaching the area where the Battalion was supposed to be (after trudging across fields and fences for about half a mile) I found no trace of them at all. The only sign of life was provided by a motley collection of troops from some other regiment, who were in the throes of a minor panic in the belief that they were about to be attacked at any moment. I reassured them as best I could and returned to the Brigadier with the news that the 4th Battalion were nowhere to be found. He grunted incredulously and surveyed the landscape through his field-glasses. Finally he put them down with a shrug : " Damn' funny," he boomed, " Can't understand it at all. Can't think what's happened to 'em."



In the circumstances there was nothing for it but to set off as we were. My little company was to resume the march as part of the 5th Battalion; and for the sake of convenience the column was organized into five "groups," of which we formed one somewhere in the middle. I possessed no map of the country between Rousbrugge and the coast, but fortunately on tackling the Brigadier I found that he had a spare one in the back of his car. And so in the gathering dusk we moved off once again.

The way was led by the Brigade Major, who, I was thankful to find, struck off the main road almost immediately and took us by a parallel but much less pretentious route. The wisdom of this decision was shown soon enough, for from our right came unmistakable sounds of the attention which the main road was receiving from the enemy artillery, while our own road went unscathed.

The fall of darkness, coupled with the realization that the coast was no longer so very far away, filled me with growing hopes, and a correspondingly rising determination to survive. The same spirit was evidently in us all, for in spite of a growing weariness we plodded on, and—more remarkable still—managed to keep together with comparatively little straggling. The most foot-sore of my own party was little Cpl. Leonard, who had suffered agonies ever since our five-day training march up to Bailleul-les-Pernes. At one point we picked up a ramshackle old bicycle from the side of the road for his benefit, but the experiment was not a success, and after a short spell of creaky and laborious progress he abandoned it once more to its fate.

Our progress was not entirely uninterrupted. For a time all went smoothly, with the Brigadier's car appearing and reappearing at intervals as he passed up and down

the column or went on to reconnoitre the state of affairs ahead. Then came our first check—a road impassable owing to the proximity of a blazing ammunition dump. We halted by a nearby cross-roads while those concerned decided what to do, and we were treated to as fine a display of fireworks as I have ever witnessed. The fire was blazing merrily, and ammunition of all kinds was going off in all directions. Apart from the spectacle, the incident gave the men the opportunity for a smoke (cigarettes had been liberally doled out from lorries as we went along the road), for, of course, against such a mighty bonfire the glow of a few cigarettes was not noticeable.

The decision was evidently that we should make a detour, for we turned off to the right and on through a place called Killem Linde. Here a voice from the darkness informed the Brigadier that the road was blocked for traffic and he would not get the car any farther—a piece of information which did not deter him for long, since I believe he eventually got the car to the coast, or very near it. As our Battalion Padré was sitting in the back, with a nasty wound in the leg, it was just as well.

From now on we found the road more and more cluttered up with burnt-out or abandoned transport of all kinds. All the way from Poperinghe we had come across ditched vehicles at intervals, sometimes singly and sometimes in groups: but now we passed a seemingly unbroken line of wrecked transport, much of which was little more than a twisted heap of charred wreckage. Truly the dive-bombers had had a feast-day, although fortunately the friendly darkness half concealed the contorted shapes of their human victims that lay sprawled by the roadside. But everywhere the reek of petrol mingling with the stench of death sickened me as I



passed. To mere physical revulsion was added, too, the realization, unpalatable but inescapable, that a great army, in saving its own skin, was sacrificing millions of pounds worth of almost unused equipment. That it had been made of little value to the enemy was but scanty consolation.

As we drew nearer and nearer to our goal the road became correspondingly more and more congested with men, horses, and vehicles, and the darkness of the night added to the general confusion. Straggling detachments of innumerable different units mingled in one long jostling column, and at times it was only by making each man hold on to the one in front of him that I was able to keep my little party together. Even then it was necessary to call the name of one's unit at frequent intervals in order to collect those who became separated in that surging throng.

At about midnight our progress was again halted. It seemed that we could not be very far from Dunkirk, for the country on each side of the road appeared to be flooded, and it was evident that the network of little dykes shown on my map had been well utilized as part of the perimeter defences. Unfortunately, the bridge by which we now found ourselves was blocked by a mass of blazing transport, and the whole road was littered with the carcasses of French horses into the bargain. Further progress along the road was apparently impossible, for we became part of a huge throng in which advance and retreat were equally hopeless. In the darkness I could see one or two dim figures trying to go round through the fields to one side, but the floods were evidently impassable, for these attempts were soon abandoned. There was no chance of getting forward to see what was happening, and the only thing for it was to sit down by the side of the road and wait until forward

movement was once more possible. Meanwhile the precious hours of darkness were slipping by.

I must have fallen asleep almost immediately, and it was something like an hour later when I awoke to find that things were moving once again. Accordingly I collected my party and we proceeded on our way—still, miraculously enough, in company with the 5th Battalion.

Dawn found us approaching a village of sorts, beyond which the road stretched straight as a ribbon until—could I believe my eyes? Was that strip of blue ahead really the sea? “*Thalassa ! Thalassa !*”—cried the weary hosts of an ancient army : and how fervently I echoed that cry of indescribable excitement and relief ! To me, at any rate, the surprise was all the greater, for in accordance with my usual policy I had persuaded myself that the coast was still some distance away, and had screwed myself up to face at least five more miles of wearisome marching. Imagine, then, the joy of finding that the coast was barely a mile ahead.

In the village our little column halted for breakfast, and a diligent search of abandoned lorries provided us with a fine variety of fare from “*M. and V.*” to *Paté de Foie Gras*, so that we were still left with a considerable quantity of the reserves which we had accumulated in the course of our march, and for which we were later only too thankful.

Here, too, I discovered an ambulance containing Pte. Boxall, much to my joy, for I felt that at any rate one of my wounded men had reached the coast and stood a fair chance of reaching home. He was his usual game self, and very cheery. I managed to get him some food, and also a cup of tea, before it was time for us to move off again and I had to wish him farewell. It was indeed farewell, for although he reached England and made good progress for some months, he died



suddenly just as he appeared to be on the road to recovery.

Shortly before we reached the shore I halted my little column for a few moments in order to close up, and we marched the last two hundred yards in fine style, in step, to the evident satisfaction of a Brigadier whose eye lit upon us.

And so, at last, we reached the sea—not at Dunkirk itself, but at Bray Dunes, a mile or two to the east, where I have no doubt the aristocracy once sunned themselves upon the warm sand. To-day a somewhat different scene presented itself.

### CHAPTER XIII

#### DUNKIRK AND AFTER

THE beach was an extraordinary sight. As far as the eye could see it stretched away into the distance, the firm sand of the shore merging farther back into dunes where the surface was no more than a thin yellow powder interspersed with parched tussocks of coarse grass. And covering all this vast expanse, like some mighty antheap upturned by a giant's foot, were the remains of the British Expeditionary Force, some standing in black clusters at the water's edge, waiting for the boats that were to take them out to the two or three ships lying off-shore, while others, whose turn had not yet come, or who were too exhausted to care whether it was their turn or not, lay huddled together in a disorderly and exhausted multitude.

On the promenade a staff officer noted our arrival, and following his directions I led my little party on to

the beach and over the sand for a distance of about half a mile. As we trudged along I was full of curiosity to know how many of the Battalion we should find here, for since their unaccountable disappearance at Rousbrugge Haringhe we had seen nothing of them. On we stumbled, searching in vain for a familiar face—and then, at last, we found them : not just a few from other companies, but dear old “ B ” Company itself, and great was the reunion, at least among all who were sufficiently wide awake to think coherently. Alan was there, tired but happy, and Cecil, who stirred in his slumber, gazed sightlessly and uncomprehendingly up at me, and relapsed once more into oblivion. Not many other officers seemed to be there, however. The Adjutant and the C.O. arrived more or less simultaneously with us : the C.O. literally “ out on his feet ” and dead to the world, while Eggie snuggled down into a hollow among the dunes and, after abjuring all and sundry to wake him in due course, was heard no more.

By now it was four or five o'clock in the morning and full daylight, with all the visions of dive-bombing which this conjured up : but this did not deter me from following the general example and, after scrounging an abandoned blanket (for it was bitterly cold), I curled myself up in it and fell fast asleep.

I must have slept for about four hours, and when I woke up I was in a condition to take a more lively interest in what was going on around me. I saw now that one of the ships lying off-shore was a burnt-out wreck ; it was said to have been set on fire by bombing a day or two before, at a time when it was full of wounded, who had had to be thrown into the sea as their only chance of escape. To-day, however, there was still no sign of German planes, and an uncanny quiet reigned along the beach. At the time I could not understand



it, the only possible explanation being that the clouds were low and the weather conditions unsuitable for flying. I did not realize then, what I know now, that the whole effort of the R.A.F. was being concentrated on keeping enemy planes away from that particular area, and even now I think that many do not sufficiently understand how much they owe to that heroic effort. Certainly at the time, for obvious, if unjustified, reasons, the bitterness of the Army towards the R.A.F. was beyond words. There came one particularly unpleasant moment when three menacing outlines appeared over the horizon and swooped down upon us: but as they roared over our heads we saw with relief that they were R.A.F. bombers. It was difficult to believe, since we had all come to assume as a matter of course that every plane must inevitably be hostile.

Meanwhile on the beach the wheels of organization were grinding slowly. We received word that we were to collect ourselves in groups of fifty, and having done so we were to remain at the back of the beach, by the dunes, until our turn came, when we would be notified accordingly. We therefore sorted ourselves out into packets of fifty (I remember going to tremendous trouble to get exactly the right number, though for the life of me I can't think why), and promptly sat down again to await developments, while in front of us the grey hulks slowly but surely took on their swarming cargo. Every now and again one of the ships would up anchor and away, but always, sooner or later, the welcome outline of another appeared on the horizon to replace it.

So the day wore on and we waited for our turn to come, but it was not until three or four in the afternoon that we were finally shepherded by the authorities to the water's edge. Here we remained for another two hours or more, tantalized by the nearness of the ships

and exasperated by the almost total absence of any means of reaching them. There were, of course, a few large rowing boats plying to and fro, but these—there were barely half a dozen in sight—were not manned by naval personnel. The consequence was that, in the excitement of the moment, they were more often than not cast loose as soon as they had carried their cargo of men to the waiting tender, or, if one or two unselfish ones did remember to row them back for the benefit of those remaining ashore, this was generally a lengthy and somewhat hazardous process.

Our own little batch waited patiently at first, but then with mounting irritation as we saw others, who had reached the water's edge later than we had, rushing into the water and seizing the boats which should rightly have carried us. But we were most of us too exhausted to do much about it, and also it seemed slightly undignified to take part in a general stampede to save our skins, tempting as the prospect of leaving that beach undoubtedly appeared.

It was left for Alan to take the energetic action that the situation demanded, and with one other he set off in a flimsy-looking skiff and paddled out to seize a large boat that was drifting empty some way out. His first efforts met with little success, for it was slow progress, and even when he did secure the other boat I fancy it drifted somewhat on the return journey and was overrun by a swarm of soldiers who had no right to it whatever.

However, in due course our chance came, and we paddled waist-high into the sea and with great difficulty clambered aboard a rowing-boat. We were fully loaded in next to no time, but then came the more formidable task of rowing out to the tender in a sea which, though not really rough, was sufficiently choppy to make it very essential to keep bows on to the waves. I was lucky



enough to have Sergt. Carr in my boatload, and he did valiant work helping me to control our oarsmen and prevent the boat from simply going round and round in circles. I myself stood in the centre of the boat, rather like John Snagge broadcasting a running commentary on the Boat Race, shouting "In," "Out," "In," "Out," in an effort to instil some sort of uniformity into our efforts.

Eventually, after several narrow escapes from capsizing, we arrived alongside the tender and clambered aboard, followed by other boatloads (including Alan), until all the available deck space was filled to capacity. Then off we went, to be disgorged once more a little farther out, this time on to the ship which was to take us to England.

By this time we were extremely wet and distinctly cold, but from the moment we stepped on board that ship we were royally treated and looked after most hospitably. Food and hot drinks were ready and waiting for all, while officers were immediately conducted to the ship's little ward-room, where there was a cheerful fire burning, and refreshments in the shape of tea, beer (English beer, at last !) and ham sandwiches awaited us.

The ship's officers were the very essence of kindness. Poor devils, they had not had any sleep for two or three days, yet nothing was too much trouble for them so long as it contributed to our comfort, and indeed in those few hours I contracted a debt to the Royal Navy that I can never hope to repay. Our ship (manned, I think, entirely by naval personnel) was nothing more than a paddle steamer, the *Duchess of Fife*, one of those many vessels whose pre-war career had given no inkling of their future glory.

Before long I was out of my wet clothes and wrapped in all the splendour of the captain's dressing-gown. Then, while most officers remained propped up on the

seats of the ward-room, dozing fitfully, I made discreet investigations as a result of which I obtained the loan of the 3rd Engineer's cabin for Alan and myself—two of us sharing one narrow bunk, yet for all that one of the most blissful nights of rest I have ever enjoyed, interrupted only by my turn as duty officer, during which I had to walk round the ship and ensure that no cigarettes or other lights were visible.

But before I turned in I did one thing which, when I look back on that evening, surprises me, although I never regretted it—I took out my razor and sallied forth to have a shave. How I mustered sufficient energy for this I do not know to this day, but I do know that the following morning, when others were suffering the discomforts of a bristly chin, I found that I was a new man altogether.

We had been told that we should not sail till it began to get dusk, and I suppose it must have been about nine o'clock that night that we finally slipped away. Meanwhile Alan and I lay dead to the world in our cabin, dimly conscious of sounds above which to our fevered brains seemed to be bombs falling or guns firing, but which were very probably no more than doors clanging overhead. My last conscious thought that evening was the bitter fear that, now that we had struggled so close to safety, destruction might after all engulf us.

*May 31, Friday*

I was woken up the next morning by Alan, who blithely informed me that I had overslept and that almost everyone else had already gone ashore. There followed great haste to dress and get up on deck, where we at last discovered our port of arrival—Ramsgate. Our crossing had taken something like twelve hours.

Our feelings as we stepped once again on to English



soil can be better imagined than described. In those few moments, and as we walked down the long jetty away from the ship, the realization of disaster and the imminence of defeat receded before the sheer joy of having lived to see England again.

There is not much left to tell. How can one hope to describe the amazing welcome which we received—the laughter and the cheers, more suited to a victory parade than the return of a vanquished army which had made an ignominious withdrawal, saving its own skin but abandoning almost the whole of its equipment? The cups of tea and packets of sandwiches, biscuits, apples, chocolate, which were thrust into our hands not only as we left the jetty, but also at almost every stopping-place on the train journey that followed? The thrill of handing to a passer-by that hastily-scribbled telegram to say that one was safe? The sight of English buses, English streets, English girls, English railway stations, and, above all, the English countryside? I had never expected to see it again, least of all to see it before the end of May in all the freshness of early summer, when the nightingales were still singing in the dark silence of Ifield Wood.

Our train journey was uneventful except for an excited uncertainty as to our destination. No one—not even the driver, we were told!—knew where we were going. As we passed through London the little back gardens of the rows of dingy houses were gay with Union Jacks, and the words “Well Done the B.E.F.” were chalked on innumerable walls and railway wagons. In the circumstances it was hardly surprising that a large number of soldiers suddenly became aware that they were heroes and many heads were sadly turned by the enthusiasm of the welcome prepared. The rejoicing which sprang from relief at a miraculous escape was misconstrued as

an expression of congratulation upon victory ; and many who only a few hours before had succumbed to panic or felt the chill of fear now wrote the letters "B.E.F." on their tin hats and shoulder straps, and stepped forth straightway in the guise of heroes, accepting unquestioningly the homage paid to them by an adoring public, whether it took the form of admiring glances or manifested itself more practically in the shape of free drinks.

That evening we reached our journey's end, which proved to be Derby, and as we drove in coaches through the town everyone was in high spirits to feel that our travels were at last over. I displayed the Swastika flag I had acquired at Caestre, and which the inhabitants viewed with a mixture of elation and derision.

Our place of refuge was the I.T.C. of the Sherwood Foresters, which was to be our home for the next week or so. And what a week ! Alan and I fell on our feet once again and were billeted in the house of a local M.O., and it may truthfully be said that at least two members of the B.E.F. were not unduly exerted by the military authorities immediately after their return from Dunkirk. In point of fact (though I am half ashamed to admit it) we had breakfast in bed every day, after which we would rise at our leisure, go up to the camp in order to find out if there were any instructions (there never were), and return to spend a placid afternoon basking in the sun in the garden.

At first our nerves were badly on edge. I found, for example, that my mental reactions constantly misled me—puffs of smoke were shell-bursts, bangs were bombs exploding, the drone of an aeroplane implied imminent attack—indeed, for some time the sight of a British plane seemed almost too strange to be true. But gradually our sense of values was restored to us, and what had been an all-too-present nightmare became no more than a memory



—a memory, vivid and unforgettable, of great events in which, however unpleasant they were, I feel glad (and a little proud) to have played a part.

## CHAPTER XIV

## CADENZA

THE events of which I have written have now lapsed into history, and it is possible to review my impressions more calmly and dispassionately than in the first flush of experience. I do so deliberately, at the risk of seeming platitudinous, because I feel strongly that it is only by emphasizing and re-emphasizing the lessons of this war that we can hope to avoid a similar catastrophe in the future.

My predominant impression remains the same to-day as it was in 1940—of a hopeless struggle by an unarmoured force, ill-equipped and almost totally lacking in air support, against an enemy overwhelmingly superior in his equipment and methods of warfare. It was our own fault. For years the democracies had continued to whistle in the dark, oblivious to the gravity of the situation, deaf to all but the music of wishful thinkers. “There will be no war—this year or next,” stated the *Daily Express* in 1939, and the anxiety of the public to be told something which it so desperately wanted to believe was mirrored in the mounting sales of that influential paper. “*La France est forte, et vous protégera*,” bellowed Daladier to the Corsicans in reply to Italian threats, at a time when, as we now know, the number of French aircraft was to be measured in tens. “Not a single man of this mighty army went on foot,” proclaimed the British press

when the B.E.F. marched up into Belgium : I hope that I have already disposed of that particular little opium dream. "The best-equipped army in the world" was the description applied to the force which landed in France with only a handful of tanks to face the German armoured divisions. No—we have had enough of wishful thinking.

Let us, then, face the fact that we entered the present struggle totally unprepared for modern warfare. It is true that the country, which had done little but stir fitfully in its slumber at the interruptions of Abyssinia, the Rhineland, Austria, and the Spanish Civil War, did crawl reluctantly out of bed at the time of Munich, and finally, with the occupation of Prague, decided that it was time to get dressed. But we had too much leeway to make up : witness the following statement made by the Prime Minister (Mr. Baldwin) in Parliament on March 3rd, 1936—

"German rearmament has been proceeding throughout the year at a steady but rapid rate. . . . In March last conscription on the basis of one-year service was universally re-established ; and the Government announced a peace-time army establishment of 36 divisions with a strength of 550,000 men. . . .

"The Italian Army has been for the past six months on a war footing. In October last it was stated that 1,200,000 men were under arms. . . .

"The Soviet forces . . . have now been increased to a total of 1,300,000 men. . . .

"In Japan the re-equipment of the Army continues to be pressed forward. . . .

"The present peace-time serving strength of the regular military field units in Great Britain is approximately 115,000 men. . . .

"His Majesty's Government propose to raise four battalions of infantry, which will to some extent mitigate the



present difficulties of the policing duties which our Imperial responsibilities place upon us."

Small wonder that in 1938 we looked back somewhat wistfully on "the years that the locusts have eaten."

These are not intended to be mere recriminations for past oversights and mistakes: errors of omission and commission are worth while scrutinizing only if by doing so we shall learn to avoid repeating them in the future. The lesson here is clear enough: we must never again allow our own armaments to lapse while other nations are making obvious plans for aggression.

Next, a word about morale. Broadly speaking, morale depends on two main factors: primarily, confidence in one's own superiority in quality and numbers, or both, on the ground and in the air; and secondarily, if this condition cannot be fulfilled, it depends on a rigid discipline previously inculcated, which inspires troops with confidence in themselves and their arms even where any visible grounds for such confidence may be entirely lacking. The B.E.F. of 1940 started the Flanders campaign full of a self-confidence due principally to newspaper and other propaganda emphasizing the strength and the preparedness of the Allied armies: but with the rapid German advance it became gradually and increasingly clear that the Allies were in fact inferior and that self-confidence had been born of delusion. Blasted from this stronghold, therefore, morale fell back to the alternative position where it became dependent on discipline alone.

It so happened, however, that only a small minority of those who now found themselves in the front line had previously experienced the shock of battle. The shock of battle—that was it: in the last war troops had more of an opportunity to grow used to bombardment during static periods of trench warfare; but this time it burst

suddenly upon them, and only the strictest discipline was capable of maintaining steadiness and preventing panic. Such discipline is not always insisted upon during training, or at any rate is all too frequently allowed to relax on the field of battle ; and although there is much to be said for " democratizing " the Army, I do realize that the " unquestioning obedience " which comes from drill and other old-fashioned methods of training (now frequently disparaged as " Blimpism ") is essential to the success of any army. By all means hoist the Red Flag and haul down the Old School Tie—but only so long as we make sure that camaraderie does not lead to chaos.

Discipline alone, however, is not enough. An army cannot be said to be ready for war until it has been seasoned by experience under fire. The Germans recognized this truth before the outbreak of war, when much of their training was carried out under realistic conditions involving the use of live ammunition even at the expense of occasional casualties. Let us, too, ensure that all our troops are given an opportunity of experiencing artillery fire and aerial bombardment, so that when the time comes the din of battle may not paralyse them.

Finally, let us learn the most important lesson of all—that a small war *now* is always preferable to a great war five or ten years hence. If the Western democracies had recognized the truth of that principle, and had had the strength to put it into practice, this misery would not have come upon us. Even a moderately strong Britain and France, recognizing in the reoccupation of the Rhineland the first uneasy stirrings of a homicidal maniac, could have stepped in without difficulty to reinforce his chains. The Austrian *Anschluss* and the so-called Sudeten crisis were equally obvious forewarnings of what was to come. Why, then, was nothing done ? Because the British and French Governments lacked three things : first, the will



to action ; second, the popular demand for action ; and, third, the means of action. The first of these, it has always been presumed, depends upon the second ; but I submit that this is a fallacy. The task of a government is to act on behalf of its people ; and if through blindness or apathy the people are unable to see the danger signal for themselves, or if they lack the opportunity or the inclination to voice their opinion sufficiently strongly—as will often happen—then it is for the Government to give a lead, and, if necessary, it must use all its powers of publicity and propaganda to bring the nation round to a realization of its peril.

In particular, let us, when this struggle is over, say less than we did in the nineteen-thirties about the “ horrors or war.” That war is bestial and altogether loathsome is undeniable : but to emphasize the fact continually is to induce in oneself and in others an increasing determination that war must be avoided *at all costs*—in other words, our old friend “ peace at any price.” Paradoxically enough, nothing makes war more certain than the adoption of this attitude, for it engenders a policy of appeasement, with all its disastrous consequences. A war postponed is *not* a war averted : it is a war magnified—it may even be a war lost.

During the last Great War a poet wrote—

If ye break faith with us who die . . .

Those words ran through my head on the day that Germany invaded Poland, and they have recurred obstinately, time and again, ever since. Well—we *have* broken faith, and, painful though the admission must be to some, those who died in 1914-18 died in vain. Let us make sure of it this time. Let us, by all means, strive to establish a new world order which will eventually render armaments superfluous and war an outcast. But

let us in the meantime remain sufficiently prudent, sufficiently sceptical, to retain and maintain, first, a strong armed force ready to fight for the preservation of peace ; and, second, the courage and determination to use that force unhesitatingly against any who in the future may dare to put personal or national ambitions before human happiness and international goodwill.






1dollarscan.com (zLibro, Inc.)  
2470 Winchester Blvd STE A  
Campbell CA 95008

I agree with the following conditions:

- 1) I am using 1dollarscan.com services based on my own request.
- 2) I agree to Terms and Conditions at 1dollarscan.com, <http://1dollarscan.com/terms.php> and my use of 1dollarscan's services will be within the scope of the Fair Use Policy (<http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>).  
Otherwise, meet at least one of the following;
  - a) I am the copyright holder of this content.
  - b) I have the permission from copyright owner.
- 3) I understand that 1dollarscan shall have no liability to me or any third party with respect to their services.
- 4) All scanned books provided herein are used internal use within Fair Use Policy.

NAME: Stan Kaplan

Signature: 

67513-2

Date: 5/4/24